DOROTHY DALE'S GREAT SECRET

MARGARET PENROSE

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BY

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By Margaret Penrose

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DOROTHY DALE: A GIRL OF TO-DAY
DOROTHY DALE AT GLENWOOD SCHOOL
DOROTHY DALE'S GREAT SECRET

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Dorothy Dale's Great Secret

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DOROTHY DALE'S GREAT SECRET

CHAPTER I

AN AUTOMOBILE RIDE

"THERE is one thing perfectly delightful about boarding schools,'" declared Tavia, "when the term closes we can go away, and leave it in another world. Now, at Dalton, we would have to see the old schoolhouse every time we went to Daly's for a pound of butter, a loaf of bread — and oh, yes! I almost forgot! Mom said we could get some bologna. Whew! Don't your mouth water, Dorothy? We always did get good bologna at Daly's!"

"Bologna!" echoed Dorothy. "As if the young ladies of Glenwood School would disgrace their appetites with such vulgar fare!"

At this she snatched up an empty cracker box, almost devouring its parifine paper, in hopes of finding a few more crumbs, although Tavia had poured the last morsels of the wafers down her own throat the night before this conversation took

place. Yes, Tavia had even made a funnel of the paper and "took" the powdered biscuits as doctors administer headache remedies.

"All the same," went on Tavia, "I distinctly remember that you had a longing for the skin of my sausage, along with the end piece, which you always claimed for your own share."

"Oh, please stop!" besought Dorothy, "or I shall have to purloin my hash from the table to-night and stuff it into —"

"The armlet of your new, brown kid gloves," finished Tavia. "They're the very color of a nice, big, red-brown bologna, and I believe the inspiration is a direct message. 'The Evolution of a Bologna Sausage,' modern edition, bound in full kid. Mine for the other glove. Watch all the hash within sight to-night, and we'll ask the girls to our clam-bake."

"Dear old Dalton," went on Dorothy with a sigh. "After all there is no place like home," and she dropped her blond head on her arms, in the familiar pose Tavia described as "thinky."

"But home was never like this," declared the other, following up Dorothy's sentiment with her usual interjection of slang. At the same moment she made a dart for a tiny bottle of Dorothy's perfume, which was almost emptied down the front

of Tavia's blue dress, before the owner of the treasure had time to interfere.

"Oh, that's mean!" exclaimed Dorothy. "Aunt Winnie sent me that by mail. It was a special kind — "

"And you know my weakness for specials — real bargains! There!" and Tavia caught Dorothy up in her arms. "I'll rub it all on your head. Tresses of sunshine, perfumed with incense!"

"Please stop!" begged Dorothy. "My hair is all fixed!"

"Well, it's 'fixest' now. The superlative you know. I do hate your hair prim. Never knew a girl with heavenly hair who did not want to make a mattress of it. I have wonderfully enhanced the beauty of your coiffure, mam'selle, for which I ask to be permitted one kiss!" and at this the two girls became so entangled in each other's embrace that it would have been hard to tell whom the blond head belonged to, or who might be the owner of the bronze ringlets.

But Dorothy Dale was the blond, and Octavia Travers, "sported" the dark tresses. "Sported" we say advisedly, for Tavia loved sport better than she cared for her dinner, while Dorothy, an entirely different type of girl, admired the things of this world that were good and beautiful, true and

reliable; but at the same time she was no prude, and so enjoyed her friend's sports, whenever the mischief involved no serious consequences.

That "Doro" as her chums called Dorothy, and Tavia could be so unlike, and yet be such friends, was a matter of surprise to all their acquaintances. But those who have read of the young ladies in the previous stories of the series, "Dorothy Dale; — A Girl of To-Day," and "Dorothy Dale at Glenwood School," have had sufficient introduction to these interesting characters to understand how natural it was for a lily (our friend Dorothy) to love and encourage a frolicsome wild flower (Tavia) to cling to the cultured stalk, to keep close to the saving influence of the lily's heart — so close that no gardener would dare to tear away that wild flower from the lily's clasp, without running the risk of cruelly injuring the more tender plant.

So it was with these two girls. No one could have destroyed their love and friendship for each other without so displacing their personalities as to make the matter one of serious consequences.

Many other girls had coveted Dorothy's love; some had even tried to obtain it by false stories, or greatly exaggerated accounts of Tavia's frolics. But Dorothy loved Tavia, and believed in her, so

all attempts to destroy her faith were futile. And it was this faith, when the time came, that inspired Dorothy Dale to keep the Great Secret.

Glenwood School was situated amid the mountains of New England, and the two girls had completed one term there. On the afternoon when this story opens they were lounging in their own particular room, nineteen by number, waiting for the recreation bell to send its muffled chimes down the corridor.

They were waiting with unusual impatience, for the "hour of freedom" to come, for they expected visitors in an automobile.

"Like as not," Tavia broke in suddenly, without offering a single excuse for the surprising interjection, "the Fire Bird will break down, and we won't get our ride after all."

"Cheerful speculation," interposed Dorothy, "but not exactly probable. The Fire Bird is an auto that never breaks down."

"What, never?" persisted Tavia, laughing.

"No, never," declared Dorothy. "Of course all automobiles are subject to turns, but to really break down — Aunt Winnie would never allow her boys to run a machine not entirely reliable."

"O-o-o-oh!" drawled Tavia, in mock surprise. Then the girls settled down to wait.

The Fire Bird, was a touring car in which the girls had enjoyed some noted rides about their home town of Dalton. Dorothy's aunt, Mrs. Winthrop White, of North Birchland, owned the car, and her two sons, Edward and Nathaniel (or Ned and Nat, to give them the titles they always went by) good looking young fellows, were usually in charge of it when their favorite cousin Dorothy, and her friend Tavia, were the other passengers.

It may as well be stated at this time that Nat and Tavia were excellent friends, and even on a ride that had been termed notorious (on account of the strange experiences that befell the party while making a tour), Tavia and Nat had managed to have a good time, and made the best of their strange adventures.

It was not surprising then that on this afternoon, while Dorothy and Tavia waited for another ride in the Fire Bird, their brains should be busy with speculative thoughts. Tavia was sure Nat would think she had grown to be a real young lady, and Dorothy was so anxious to see both her cousins, that she fell to thinking they might have outgrown the jolly, big-boy relationship, and would come to her stiff and stylish young men.

The peal of the recreation bell in the outer hall

suddenly aroused the girls, and, at the same moment the "honk-honk" of the Fire Bird's horn announced the arrival of the long expected boys.

"There they are!" exclaimed Tavia, quite unnecessarily, for Dorothy was already making her pearl-tinted veil secure over her yellow head; and while Tavia was wasting her time, looking out of the window at the auto, which was surrounded by boys and girls who stood on the path, plainly admiring the two cousins and the stylish car, Dorothy was quite ready for the ride.

"Do come, Tavia!" she called. "The afternoon is short enough!"

"Com — ing!" shouted her irrepressible companion in high glee, making a lunge for her own veil, and tossing it over her head as she dashed down the corridor.

Dorothy stopped at the office on her way out to tell the principal, Mrs. Pangborn, that the expected visitors had arrived, and that she and Tavia were starting for the ride, permission to go having been granted in advance.

Outside, just beyond the arch in the broad driveway, the Fire Bird panted and puffed, as if anxious to take flight again. Ned was at the steering wheel and as for Nat, he was helping Tavia into the machine "with both hands" some jealous

onlookers declared afterward. However Dorothy's friend Rose-Mary Markin (known to her chums as Cologne because of her euphonious first names) insisted differently in the argument that followed the puffing away of the car.

It was no small wonder that the coming of the Fire Bird should excite such comment among the girls at Glenwood school. An automobile ride was no common happening there, for while many of the parents of the young ladies owned such machines, Glenwood was far away from home and so were the autos.

Edna Black, called Ned Ebony, and regarded as Tavia's most intimate friend, insisted that Tavia looked like a little brown sparrow, as she flew off, with the streamers of her brown veil flying like wings. Molly Richards, nick-named Dick, and always "agin' th' government" like the foreigner in politics, declared that the girls "were not in it" with the boys, for, as she expressed it, "girls always do look like animated rag-bags in an automobile."

"Boys just put themselves on the seat and stay put," she announced, "But girls — they seem to float above the car, and they give me the shivers!"

"All the same," interrupted Cologne, "the damsels manage to hang on."

"And Dorothy was a picture," ventured Nita Brant, the girl given to "excessive expletive ejaculations," according to the records of the Nick Association, the official club of the Juniors.

So the Fire Bird, with its gay little party, flew over the hills of Glenwood. Dorothy was agreeably surprised to find her cousins just as good natured and just as boy-like as they had been when she had last seen them, and they, in turn, complimented her on her improved appearance.

"You look younger though you talk older," Ned assured Dorothy, with a nice regard for the feminine feeling relative to age.

"And Tavia looks — looks — how?" stammered Nat, with a significant look at his elder brother.

"Search me!" replied the other evasively, determined not to be trapped by Nat into any "expert opinion."

"Beyond words!" finished Nat, with a glance of unstinted admiration at his companion.

"Bad as that?" mocked Tavia. "The girls do call me 'red head' and 'brick-top.' Yes, even 'carroty' is thrown at me when I do anything to make Ned mad. You know that's the girl," she hurried to add, "the girl — Edna Black — Ned

Ebony for short, you know. She's the jolliest crowd — "

"How many of her?" asked Ned, pretending to be ignorant of Tavia's school vernacular.

"Legion," was the enthusiastic answer, which elastic comment settled the question of Edna Black, for the time being, at least.

The roads through Glenwood wound up and down like thread on a spool. Scarcely did the Fire Bird find itself on the top of a hill before it went scooting down to the bottom. Then another would loom up and it had to be done all over again.

This succession of steep grades, first tilting up and then down, kept Ned busy throwing the clutches in and out, taking the hills on the low gear, then slipping into full speed ahead as a little level place was reached, and again throwing off the power and drifting down while the brakes screeched and hummed as if in protest at being made to work so hard. The two girls, meanwhile, were busy speculating on what would happen if an "something" should give way, or if the powerful car should suddenly refuse to obey the various levers, handles, pedals and the maze of things of which Ned seemed to have perfect command.

"This reminds me of the Switch-back Rail-

way," remarked Nat, as the machine suddenly lurched first up, and then down a rocky "bump."

"Y-y-y-es!" agreed Ned, shouting to be heard above the pounding of the muffler. "It's quite like a trip on the Scenic Railway — pretty pictures and all."

"I hope it isn't dangerous," ventured Dorothy, who had too vivid a remembrance of the narrow escape on a previous ride, to enjoy the possibility of a second adventure.

"No danger at all," Ned hastened to assure her,

"A long hill at last!" exclaimed Nat, as the big strip of brown earth uncoiled before them, like so many miles of ribbon dropped from the sky, with a knot somewhere in the clouds. "A long hill for sure. None of your dinky little two-for-a-cent kinds this time!"

"Oh!" gasped Dorothy, involuntarily catching at Ned's arm. "Be careful, Ned!"

Ned took a firmer grip on the steering wheel, as he finished throwing out the gear and shutting off the power, while the spark lever sent out a shrill sound as he swung it in a segment over the rachet.

The hill was not only remarkably steep, but consisted of a series of turns and twists. Down

the grade the car plunged in spite of the brakes that Ned jammed on, with all his force, to prevent a runaway. He was a little pale, but calm, and with his steady hands on the wheel, clinging firmly to it in spite of the way it jerked about, as if trying to get free, he guided the Fire Bird down, the big machine swerving from right to left, but ever following where the lad directed it.

As they swung around a turn in the descending road a clump of trees obstructed the view for a moment. Then the car glided beyond them, gathering speed every moment, in spite of the brakes.

"The creek!" yelled Tavia in sudden terror, pointing to where a small, but deep stream flowed under the road. "There's the creek and the bridge is broken!"

The water was spanned by a frail structure, generally out of order and in a state of uncertain repair. It needed but a glance to show that it was now in course of being mended, for there was a pile of material near it. Work, however, had been temporarily suspended.

Then, there flashed into view a warning signboard announcing that the old planking of the bridge had been taken up to allow the putting down of new, and that the bridge was impassable.

The four horror-stricken occupants of the car saw this at a glance.

"Stop the car!" cried Tavia.

"Can't!" answered Ned hoarsely. "I've got the emergency brake on, but it doesn't seem to hold."

"It's all right," called Nat. "I saw a wagon go over the bridge when we were on our way to the school this afternoon."

"But it crossed on some loose, narrow planks!" Tavia gasped. "I saw them put the boards there yesterday when we were out for our walk! I forgot all about them! Oh! Stop the car! We can't cross on the planks! We'll all be killed!"

Ned leaned forward, pulling with all his strength on the brake handle, as if to force it a few more notches back and make the steel band grip tighter the whirring wheels that were screeching out a shrill protest at the friction.

"I — I can't do it!" he exclaimed almost in a whisper.

The Fire Bird was dashing along the steep incline. Ned clung firmly to the steering wheel, for though there was terrible danger ahead, it was also close at hand should the auto swerve from the path. His face was white, and Nat's forced

breathing sounded loud in the ears of the terror-stricken girls.

The bridge was but a few hundred feet away. The auto skidded along as if under power, though the gasolene was shut off.

"There's a plank across the entrance! Maybe that will stop us!" cried Nat.

"Never in this world!" replied Ned, in despairing tones.

Dorothy was sending up wordless prayers, but she did not stir from her seat, sitting bravely still, and not giving way to useless terror. Nor did Tavia, once the first shock was over, for she saw how quiet Dorothy was, and she too, sank back among the cushions, waiting for the crash she felt would soon come.

"If some boards are only down!" murmured Ned. "Maybe I can steer —"

The next instant the Fire Bird had crashed through the obstruction plank. It splintered it as if it were a clothes pole, and, a moment later, rumbled out upon the frail, loose planking, laid lengthwise across the floorless bridge, as a path for the repair teams.

"Oh! Oh!" shrieked the two girls in one breath.

Nat jumped up from his seat, and, leaning forward, grasped his brother by the shoulders.

Then what followed was always a mystery to the four who had an involuntary part in it. The front wheels took the narrow planks, and clung there as Ned held the steering circle steady. There was a little bump as the rear wheels took the same small boards. There was a crashing, splintering sound and then, before any of those in the car had a chance to realize it, the Fire Bird had whizzed across the bridge and was brought to a quick stop on the other side.

"Whew!" gasped Ned, as he tried to open the paralyzed hands that seemed grown fast to the steering wheel.

"Look at that!" cried Nat, as he leaped from the car and pointed back toward the bridge. "We broke two planks in the very middle, and only the fast rate we clipped over them saved us from going down!"

"What an escape!" cried Tavia as she jumped from her seat.

"Is the car damaged?" asked Dorothy, as she too alighted to stand beside her chum.

"Something happened to the radiator when we hit the rail and broke it," said Ned, as he saw wa-

ter escaping from the honey-comb reservoir. "But I guess it won't amount to much. It isn't leaking badly. The idea of the county having a picture bridge over a river! Why there's a swift current here, and it's mighty deep. Just look at that black whirlpool near the eddy. If we'd gone down there what the machine left of us would have been nicely cooled off at any rate!"

The two boys were soon busy examining the car, while Dorothy and Tavia stood in the road.

"Wasn't it dreadful!" exclaimed Dorothy. "I do believe we ought not to go auto riding — something happens every time we go out."

"And to think that I knew about the bridge!" whispered Tavia. "Only yesterday I saw it and noticed how unsafe it was. Then I forgot all about it. Oh, Dorothy! If anything had happened it would have been my fault!"

CHAPTER II

TAVIA HAS PLANS

DOROTHY threw her arms about Tavia, and, for a few moments the two girls were locked in each other's embrace. The reaction, following their lucky escape from almost certain death, had unnerved them. Nor were the two boys altogether free from a shaky feeling, as they carefully looked over the car to see if it had suffered any further damage than the leaky radiator.

"Think she'll do?" asked Nat.

"Guess so," replied his brother. "My, but that was as close a call as I have ever had."

"Me too. I guess we'd better take a breathing spell before we go on."

The boys sat down on a grassy bank, and the girls followed their example. They looked back over the bridge, and at the two broken planks that had nearly proved their undoing. Through the spaces, where the flooring was torn up, the black, swirling waters could be seen.

While the auto party are resting until they have

somewhat gotten over the fright caused by their narrow escape, let me tell something of Dorothy and her friends. As set forth in the first book of this series, "Dorothy Dale; A Girl of To-Day," the girl was the daughter of Major Frank Dale, a veteran of the Civil War. He ran a weekly newspaper, called *The Bugle* in Dalton, a small town in New York state. Dorothy's mother had died some years previous. The girl had two brothers, younger than herself, named Joe and Roger.

Dorothy took part in a temperance crusade in Dalton and had much to do in unraveling the mystery of an unfortunate man given to drink. He left a small fortune to his daughter, whose whereabouts were unknown, and Dorothy succeeded in finding her. In her work the girl was much hampered by a man named Anderson, who sought to do her bodily harm, and who was at the bottom of the mystery concerning the daughter of the unfortunate man.

Dorothy proved herself a brave girl, and, with the help of Tavia, who became her especial chum, did much to aid several persons in Dalton.

In the second volume, "Dorothy Dale at Glenwood School" there I related how Dorothy and her father came upon better days. Major Dale

fell heir to quite a sum of money, and could give up the newspaper.

Dorothy was sent to Glenwood School, where Tavia accompanied her. The two girls had many exciting times there, and Dorothy was suspected of something for which she was not to blame, suffering much in consequence of her desire to shield another girl. There was much fun at the school, in spite of this, however including a queer walking match and a strange initiation.

Dorothy and her father moved to North Birchland, the home of Mrs. Winthrop White, Mr. Dale's sister. Anderson, the man who had caused Dorothy so much trouble turned up again, but was eventually sent to jail.

After the holidays Dorothy and Tavia returned to school, where we find them at the opening of this story. They had become friends of nearly all the students, though, as is natural, had made some enemies, as what girl does not?

Now the party on the roadside prepared to start off again.

"I can't forgive myself for not remembering about the dangerous state of the bridge," went on Tavia, when Ned and Nat had announced that the auto was fit to continue its journey.

"Of course it wasn't your fault," said Dorothy.

"Yes it was," insisted Tavia. "You wouldn't have forgotten it, Doro, dear!"

And, to give Dorothy credit, she would not have been so thoughtless. But she was a different type of girl from Tavia. It was the way she had been brought up, as much as her own character, that caused this difference. Good breeding is not a virtue, it is a blessing: hence in considering such a gift we admire the fortunate possessor, just as we esteem the beauty of the cultured rose, and, naturally compare it favorably when placed next to some coarse untrained wild flower.

So it was with our two friends, Dorothy and Tavia. Dorothy was well bred, and could always be relied upon, for the good breeding was nicely coupled with a kindness of heart that composed a charming character. Though Dorothy had no mother her aunt, Mrs. Winthrop White almost filled that place in the girl's heart.

The White family, with whom Dorothy, her father and two brothers had gone to live, since the advent of the legacy, consisted of Mrs. White and her two sons, Nat and Ned. Mr. White had died some years ago, while engaged in a scientific expedition.

Not having a daughter of her own Dorothy's

Aunt Winnie was especially fond of her pretty niece, and, as the girl could barely remember her own mother, she lavished her affection on her father's sister.

Dorothy's affection, love and devotion to her father was of a different type from that given to any other living creature, not excepting her own darling brothers, Joe and Roger, and Roger had almost grown up in his sister's arms, for he had been a tiny baby when his mother was called away.

It was in Dalton that Dorothy had met and learned to love Tavia. The Travers family, of whom Tavia was the most interesting member, lived not far from the Dale homestead. Tavia had grown up with Dorothy, as her most intimate friend and companion, and it was Dorothy's love for Tavia that had wrought miracles for the girl who lacked proper home training, for her parents were of that class generally designated as improvident.

Tavia always ignored the saving rules of correct society, and, being naturally bright, and strangely pretty was, now that she was in her fifteenth year, in a fair way to be spoiled by those who delighted to hear her witty nonsense, and who looked upon her frolics as entertaining in an otherwise stupid old world.

"Well, shall we go along now?" asked Ned, as he again took his place at the steering wheel.

"Yes, but go slow," begged Tavia. "We can go home by a different road. We have lots of time, before we have to be back to Glenwood School for tea."

"Slow it is," replied Ned, not at all sorry that he could take it easy after the strenuous time. Dorothy had many questions to ask her cousins — all about her father's rheumatism — whether the electric treatment was doing him as much good as the doctors had promised — how her brothers were getting on at school — how strange it seemed to have Roger at school! — and scores of other things. But she always came back to her father or the boys — to Roger — she could scarcely imagine her baby brother running home to Aunt Winnie with his book under his arm.

While Ned and Dorothy were thus busy with family affairs, Nat and Tavia, seated on the rear seat, were discussing purely personal matters. Nat told of the tour he and his brother had made from North Birchland, the trip being undertaken with other members of a club, which was holding a meet not far from Glenwood School. Tavia found plenty of small interesting talk to "give and take" with Nat.

"Dorothy," she asked suddenly, "do you think we could get off all day to-morrow and take a run out to where the auto meet is being held? It would be all sorts of fun and — "

"To-morrow?" echoed Dorothy. "Why you know we have our English exams. and our geometry to make up. Besides, Mrs. Pangborn would never allow us to go to a boys' camp."

"Allow us! Just as if we were in the kindergarten! Let's make up some excuse and go! Now, Doro, don't look so shocked! Surely you have the right to go out with your own cousins?"

"Tavia, don't talk such nonsense!" exclaimed Dorothy severely. "You know perfectly well we are under the school rules, and that we are in honor bound not to violate them. As if any sensible girl would risk her good standing for such an escapade!"

"What's the 'standing' at Glenwood compared to the 'sitting' in the Fire Bird?" asked Tavia flippantly. "Besides, just think of all the jolly fellows we would meet; wouldn't we, Nat?"

"There's a great collection of wild ducks out there at the auto camp," Nat answered rather reluctantly, for he plainly saw that Tavia's surpris-

ing proposition had caused Dorothy serious annoyance.

"Well, I've a mind to go myself. Will you come for me, boys? I could disappear at class hour, when all the 'tattle-tales' will be sure to be busy, scheming out of their work. Then I could get back in time to have my head tied up at lunch hour — head-ache all the morning, you know. Simplest thing in the world."

Even the boys scarcely smiled as Tavia unfolded a possible plan to deceive her teachers, and to dishonor her own name. Her friends were well accustomed to her pranks and prattle, and usually regarded her nonsense as mere babble. But, somehow, Tavia, was "growing up," lately, and it seemed quite time for her to take life more seriously.

"Tavia," spoke up Dorothy finally, "you came to Glenwood upon my aunt's recommendation, and and under my — "

"Wing!" broke in Tavia, throwing her arms out toward the slender form of the girl seated ahead of her in the auto.

"At any rate," finished Dorothy, "I'm perfectly sure that my cousins will never take part in any such nonsense."

"Oh, Mr. Flea, you've bitten me, and you must die!" sang Tavia, making a series of melo-dramatic gestures, that caused the boys to laugh and even made Dorothy smile in forgiveness.

"Thus are my social ambitions nipped in the bud — extinguished in their first, faint gleaming," went on Tavia, assuming a tone of tragedy. "Well, my fairy-godmother, Dorothy Dale Glenwood, when that day comes that I am forced to spurn the lines of the Social Swim, and you find me beyond the ropes, clinging helplessly to the tail-end of my former prestige, carried out with the great, surging tide of struggling humanity, then you will remember that I had attempted a correct debut, and it ended in a splash of Dale indignation!"

Somehow Travia's nonsense had a ring of reality to-day. Perhaps it was the narrow escape at the bridge that had tinted her pictures with such a serious tone — she seemed preoccupied, and gave her chatter in words contradicted by her voice and manner. It was some minutes before any one spoke. All appeared to be enjoying the "valedictory," and presently Tavia, promising to "turn over a new leaf," made a grab for a branch of a tree the auto just then passed under, and swished

the foliage she captured until every leaf showed its silvery under-side against the deep blue sky. She laughed at her joke.

"Of course you know," said Ned, as he swung the car into a cross-road that led to Glenwood, "mother expects you to come to North Birchland, with Dorothy, this summer, Tavia. We'll try to make you comfortable — ahem! Nat has a brand new tandem, besides white duck duds to burn — "

"Nixy! To wear," corrected his brother. "Mother says white ducks are economical for man — and beast."

"Of course you'll come with me, Tavia," said Dorothy, noting instantly that her chum had not responded to the kind invitation that Nat had delivered for his mother.

"Perhaps," replied Tavia, vaguely.

"Are you going to spend all your time at Dalton? continued Dorothy, much puzzled at Tavia's manner.

"Oh, no indeed," answered Tavia, promptly this time, showing plainly, that she had other plans than those connected with her home town.

"I hope you'll come," said Nat aside, in pardonable earnestness, for his good times, with the "little bronze beauty" of Dalton, were cherished

among his very best memories. Tavia was certainly a jolly girl, and Nat liked her — why should he not — like her?

"Oh, I'll be sure to see you," Tavia answered Nat.

Sure to see him? Yes, but she little dreamed then how very glad she would be to see him — and what serious happenings were to take place before that meeting.

CHAPTER III

A CUP OF TEA

"DOROTHY," began Tavia that evening, as the two girls sat alone in their room, enjoying their usual good-night conference, "why couldn't you take that spin out to the auto meet. It would be no end of good fun."

"Fun!" echoed Dorothy, surprised that Tavia should again venture to propose such a thing. "Why, Tavia! Really you shock me!" Then she went to the little dresser, under pretext of looking for something, but in reality to gain time — she scarcely knew what to say to her chum, whose sudden whim was so startling.

Tavia sat on the box divan, her hands in her lap, and her brown head bent over, a strange and serious attitude for the girl who was never known to sit still, even in church; and who had the reputation of being the jolliest girl at Glenwood. For some moments she appeared to be unconscious of Dorothy's presence, so absorbed was she in her own thoughts. Dorothy was now regarding her

curiously. What could have turned Tavia's head? For turned from its usually bright and happy line of thought it plainly was.

"What is it, Tavia?" she asked finally, stealing up to the crouched figure, and placing her arm gently about her chum's neck.

"Why?" inquired the other, with a sudden start, as if afraid Dorothy would divine her thoughts.

"You are worried about something — come tell me what it is!"

"Worried!" Travia jumped up, shaking off Dorothy's arm. "Worried! Dorothy Dale, I believe you're not well! You act morbid — creepy!"

Dorothy turned away. She was hurt — crushed — that Tavia should spurn her affection and refuse her confidence.

"We always told each other everything," and Dorothy almost sighed, as her words came slowly, and with strange coldness. "I never imagined you would keep any important secret from me."

"You silly!" exclaimed Tavia, throwing her arms around Dorothy this time. "Who said I had a secret? What in the world has put that wild notion into your yellow head? — bless it!"

This last expression brought a kiss to the golden

ringlets, and, as the two girls sat there, Dorothy with a far-away look in her eyes that were clouded with unbidden tears, Tavia with her cheek pressed lovingly against the blond head, and her own eyes looking into some unknown future, their pose was like a stage picture — the kind usually presented when one sister is about to leave a country home, and the other bids her stay.

"Aren't we a couple of jays!" broke in Tavia, as soon as she appeared to realize the melo-dramatic effect. "I declare we ought to travel as 'The Glum Sisters — Mag and Liz.' There! Wouldn't we make a hit for teary ones? Weeps are in great demand they say. Smiles are being overworked in the profresh!" and she strode up to the mirror with a most self-satisfied glance at her pretty face.

"Tavia, you are getting awfully big for slang — it seems more like sneering than joking," exclaimed Dorothy. "And I've been wanting to say that to you — some of the other girls have noticed it. They say you act more like a chorus girl than a Glenwood pupil. Of course I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I thought it would be better for me to tell you than for you to hear it from some one else."

"Chorus girl! Thanks! No need to apolo-

gize, I assure you. That's from silly, little Nita Brandt, I suppose? Well, better to act like a chorus girl than — a fool!" blurted out Tavia with a show of temper. "And any silly girl, who can not keep things to herself — well, I always thought Nita was a featherhead and now I know it!"

"Oh, indeed it was not Nita!" Dorothy hastened to assure her. "It was at the lawn tea the other day. You were 'acting'; don't you remember? Doing that funny toe dance you are always trying lately."

"O-o-o-o-h!" and Tavia made a queer little pout, and a very funny face. "So they appreciated my maiden effort, eh? I am indeed flattered! Tell the girls I'm much obliged and I'll see that they get passes for the initial performance. Tell them, also, to have the bouquets tagged — it's so annoying to have a great stack of 'Please accepts' to answer, with the superscriptions 'cut out' so to speak. I know all the girls will send pansies — they are so sweet, and would make such wicked faces for the girls who could not conveniently present their own adorable 'phizes'!"

"What in the world are you talking about?" asked Dorothy, who had been listening to the outburst with a queer idea that all this stage business

was not mere idle chatter — that there might be a reason for Tavia's cynicism.

"Talking about auto rides," quietly answered Tavia, recovering herself with an effort. "Wasn't that a dandy this afternoon? And to think we might have missed that 'Horatius at the bridge' business if I had been silly enough to mention that the planking was gone!"

"Don't talk of it!" exclaimed Dorothy, shuddering. "I cannot bear to think of what might have happened. And, Tavia, you must not think I have adopted the lecture platform for good, but I must say, it was careless of you not to mention about the bridge — especially as you knew what a hill led down to it, and how the Fire Bird can cover hills."

"Of course you know I entirely forgot it, Doro," and now Tavia showed some remorse at the reprimand.

"My! There's the bell!" exclaimed Dorothy as a clang sounded down the corridor. "I had no idea it was so late," and she jumped up to disrobe. "Quick, or Miss Higley will see our light."

"Let her," answered Tavia indifferently. "I don't feel very well, and would just love something warm — say a nice little cup of tea —"

A tap at the door interrupted her remarks. Dorothy jumped into a large closet and Tavia calmly opened the portal.

It was Miss Higley, the second assistant teacher, with rather a forbidding expression on her wrinkled face, and who, among the girls, bore a reputation characterized as "sour."

"Why is this?" she demanded, stepping in and brushing Tavia aside.

"I was just thinking of calling you," answered Tavia, clapping her hand to her waist line. "I have such a dreadful — Oh, dear!" and she sat down without further explanation.

"Do you need anything?" asked Miss Higley, her tone more kindly.

"Oh, no; certainly not," sighed Tavia. "I would not trouble you. But if I might have a sip of tea — that tea you brought Dorothy did her so much good the other night."

She paused to allow a proper expression of agony to spread over her face, and gently rubbed her hand over the region covered by her belt.

"I suppose you made that tea yourself, didn't you? It was so good, Dorothy told me."

That settled it. For any one to praise Miss Higley's brew! So few persons really do appre-

ciate a good cup of tea. As usual Tavia had "won out."

"Why of course I'll get you a cup. I have just made a small pot — I felt rather — rather tired myself. I don't, as a rule, drink tea at night, but I was not altogether well. Where is Dorothy?"

"Just slipping on a robe," with a glance at the closet where her chum was concealed. "I'm afraid I disturbed her," went on Tavia glibly.

"Well, I'll get the tea," Miss Higley remarked, as she started to leave the room. "I'll bring the pot here and we can take it together."

"Quick!" called Tavia to Dorothy as the door closed. "Slip on your robe. Tea with Higley! Of all the doin's!" and she promptly turned a somersault on the hitherto unrumpled bed. "Won't the girls howl! I do hope she brings biscuits. There, get down your box, you precious miser! Just think of 'crackering' Higley!"

Dorothy appeared dumfounded. It had all been arranged so quickly — and there was Miss Higley back again. She carried a tray with a small china teapot and three blue cups to match.

"I thought Dorothy might like a cup," she remarked in a sort of apologetic way. "There now," as Tavia and Dorothy relieved her of the

tray, "it will be pleasant to have a sip together. Of course we would not do it but for Octavia's illness." (Tavia looked to be in dreadful pain at that moment.) "But since we have to give her a cup of tea, we may as well make a virtue of necessity."

"It is very kind of you, Miss Higley," Dorothy said, rather hesitatingly. "I'm sure that we — that is I — I mean Tavia — should not have put you to all this trouble — but of course one can't help being ill," she hastened to add, for she felt she was rather giving Tavia's secret away.

"It really is too bad to make all this fuss," the supposed sufferer interjected. "You went to a lot of trouble for me, Miss Higley, and I appreciate it very much," and Tavia winked the eye next to Dorothy, but concealed the sign from the sight of the instructress. Tavia was trying hard not to laugh, and her repressed emotion shook the tray to the no small danger of upsetting the teapot, cups and all.

"I never consider my duty any trouble," answered Miss Higley, seeming to feel the obligation of being dignified. In fact, it did not occur to her just then that she was doing a most unprecedented thing — taking tea with two school girls, and after hours at that! However, she had com-

mitted herself, and now there was no way out. Dorothy presented her package of chocolate crackers, and Miss Higley took some, while Tavia arranged the tea tray on the little table.

Surely the scene was mirth-provoking. Dorothy in her pretty blue robe, Tavia with her hair loose, collar off and shoes unlaced, and Miss Higley, prim as ever, in her brown mohair, with the long black cord on her glasses. There the three sat, sipping tea and "making eyes,"—"too full for utterance," as Tavia would say.

"Such lovely tea," Dorothy managed to gulp out at the risk of allowing her mouth to get loose in a titter, once the tight line of silence was broken.

Then, all at once they stopped drinking—some one was coming down the hall. Miss Higley arose instantly. The gentle tap on the door was answered by Tavia.

Mrs. Pangborn!

"Oh," she apologized, "I did not mean to disturb a little social tea. Do sit down, Honorah," to Miss Higley. "I'm very glad to see you enjoying yourself," and Mrs. Pangborn meant what she said.

"Oh, indeed, I merely came to administer to a sick girl. Octavia was suddenly taken with cramps."

SHE SAW A WHITE OBJECT STANDING BEFORE THE MIRROR

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Mrs. Pangborn glanced at Tavia.

"But that cup of tea has made me feel so much better," declared Dorothy's room-mate, with that kind of truth that mere words make — the kind that challenges falsehood.

"I am always glad to see you looking after the girls, Honorah," went on the principal, "but I am equally glad to see you consider yourself. I'm sure you have a perfect right to take a cup of tea here. My dear," to Dorothy, "perhaps you have a sip left?"

Dorothy found there was another cup of the beverage, still warm in the little teapot, and this she poured into her own pink and white china cup for Mrs. Pangborn.

Miss Higley remained standing, seemingly too abashed to move.

"Do finish yours," said Tavia, pushing the empty chair toward the embarrassed teacher.

But Tavia's mirth showed through her alleged illness, and Miss Higley began to feel that she had been imposed upon.

"If you — if you will excuse me," she stammered.

"Oh, do finish your tea," begged Mrs. Pangborn, and so the severe little teacher was obliged to sit down again.

An hour later Tavia was still trying to "untwist her kinks," as she described her attacks of muffled laughter.

"Oh, wasn't it gloriotious!" she exclaimed. "To think I couldn't get a single twinge in my entire system! If I only could put that sort of a cramp in alcohol, wouldn't it be an heirloom to Glenwood!"

"Please do stop," pleaded Dorothy, from under her quilt. "The next time they may bring a doctor and a stomach pump, and if you don't let me go to sleep I do believe I will call her."

"You dare to and I'll get something dreadfully contagious, so you will have to be disinfected and isolated. But Higley the terrible! The abused little squinty-eyed tattle-tale! Oh, when Mrs. Pangborn said she was glad to see her enjoying herself! That persecuted saint enjoying herself! Didn't she look the part?"

But even such mirth must succumb to slumber when the victim is young and impressionable, so, with yawns and titters, Tavia finally quieted down to sleep.

CHAPTER IV

THE APPARITION

It seemed to Dorothy that she had scarcely closed her eyes when she was startled by someone moving about the room. She sat up straight to make sure she was not dreaming, and then she saw a white object standing before the mirror!

A beam of moonlight glimmered directly across the glass, and Dorothy could now see that the figure was Tavia.

Surmising that her companion had merely arisen to get a throat lozenge, for she had been taking them lately, Dorothy did not speak, expecting Tavia to return to her bed directly.

But the girl stood there — so long and so still that Dorothy soon called to her.

"What is the matter, Tavia?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," returned the other, without looking around.

"But what are you doing?"

"Making up," and Dorothy could see her daubing cold cream over her face.

Still convinced that Tavia was busy with some ordinary toilet operation, as she had, of late, become very particular about such matters, Dorothy turned over and closed her eyes. But she could not sleep. Something uncanny seemed to disturb her every time she appeared to be dropping off into a doze.

Finally she sat up again. There was Tavia still before the mirror, daubing something over her face.

"Tavia!" called Dorothy sharply. "What in the world are you doing?"

"Making up," replied Tavia a second time, and without moving from her original position.

Making up! Surely she was spreading cold cream and red crayon dust all over her face! Had she lost her mind?

For an instant Dorothy stood watching her. But Tavia neither spoke nor turned her head.

"Tavia!" she called, taking hold of the hand that held the red chalk. Dorothy noticed that Tavia's palm and fingers were cold and clammy! And Tavia's eyes were open, though they seemed sightless. Dorothy was thoroughly frightened now. Should she call someone? Miss Higley had charge of that wing of the school, and per-

haps would know what to do. But Dorothy hesitated to make a scene. Tavia was never ill, and if this was only some queer spell it would not be pleasant to have others know about it.

Then, feeling intuitively, that this "making up" should not be made a public affair, Dorothy determined to get Tavia back into her own bed.

"Are you ill?" she asked, rubbing her own hand over her companion's greasy forehead.

"Ill? No, indeed," Tavia replied, as mechanically as she had spoken before. Still she smeared on the cold cream and red crayon.

"Come!" commanded Dorothy, and, to her amazement, the girl immediately laid down the box of cream and the stick of chalk while Dorothy led her to the bed and helped her to make herself comfortable on the pillows.

Then Dorothy quietly went to the dresser and lighted a tiny candle, carrying it over to Tavia's bedside.

Peering anxiously into her face she found her room-mate sleeping and breathing naturally. There was no evidence of illness, and then, for the first time, it occurred to Dorothy that Tavia had been walking in her sleep! And making-up in her sleep!

What could it mean?

How ghastly that hideous color and the streaks made Tavia's face appear!

And, as Dorothy sat beside the bed, gazing into that besmeared face, while the flicker of the little candle played like a tiny lime-light over the girl's cruelly changed features, a strange fear came into Dorothy's heart!

After all, was Tavia going to disappoint her? Would she fail just when she seemed to have turned the most dangerous corner in her short career — that of stepping from the freedom of girlhood into the more dignified realm of young-ladyship? And would she always be just ordinary Tavia Travers? Always of contradictory impulses, was she never to be relied upon — never to become a well-bred girl?

Tavia turned slightly and rubbed her hand across her face. She seemed to breathe heavily, Dorothy thought, and, as she touched Tavia's painted cheek she was certain it was feverish. With that promptness of action that had always characterized Dorothy's work in real emergencies, she snatched the cold cream from the dresser where Tavia had left it, and, with deft fingers, quickly rubbed a generous supply over the face on the pillows.

Although Tavia was waking now Dorothy was determined, if possible, to remove all traces of the red paint before Tavia herself should know that it had been on her cheeks. Briskly, but with a hand gentle and calm, Dorothy rubbed the cream off on her own linen handkerchief, taking the red mixture with it. Nothing was now left on Tavia's face but a thin coating of the cold cream. That could tell no tales.

Tavia turned to Dorothy and opened her eyes.

"What — what is the matter?" she asked, like one waking from a strange dream.

"Nothing, dear," answered Dorothy. "But I guess you had some night vision," and she placed the candle, still lighted, on the dresser.

"Did I call? Did I have the nightmare? Why are you not in bed?"

"I got up to see if you were all right," answered Dorothy truthfully. "Do you want anything? Shall I get you a nice cool drink from the ice tank?"

Tavia was rubbing her face.

"What's this on my cheeks?" she asked, bringing down her hand, smeared with cold cream.

"I thought you were feverish," said Dorothy, "and I put a little cream on your face — cold

cream might be better than nothing, I thought, as we had no alcohol."

Tavia did not seem her natural self, and Dorothy, not slow to note the change in her, was only waiting to see her companion more fully awake, and so out of danger of being shocked suddenly, before calling for help, or, at least, for some medicine.

"My head aches awfully," said the girl on the bed. "I would like a drink of water — if — if it is not too much trouble."

A call bell was just at the door and Dorothy touched the gong as she went out into the hall to get the water.

She had scarcely returned with the drink when Miss Higley, in gown and slippers, entered the room. The light had been turned on by this time, and Tavia could see that the teacher was present, but, whether too sick or too sleepy to notice, she seemed to take the situation as a matter of course, and simply drank the water that Dorothy held to her lips, then sank wearily back on her pillow.

Miss Higley, without saying a word, picked up the hand that lay on the coverlet and felt the pulse. Dorothy stood looking anxiously on.

Tavia really seemed sick, and the tinge of

scarlet crayon, that remained after Dorothy's cold cream wash, added a higher tint to the feverish flush that now suffused the girl's cheeks.

" Yes, she has a fever," whispered Miss Higley. " But it is not a very high one. I will go and get my thermometer. Meanwhile pick up your garments, Dorothy, so you can take my room, while I stay here the rest of the night."

Before Dorothy could answer Miss Higley had tiptoed noiselessly from the apartment. Dorothy did not like to leave Tavia — surely it was not anything that might be contagious. But when the teacher returned she insisted on Dorothy going directly to the room at the end of the hall, while she took up her post at the bedside of Tavia.

It seemed so hard to Dorothy to leave her friend there alone with a comparative stranger. As she reluctantly closed the door on Tavia and Miss Higley, Dorothy's eyes were filled with tears. What could be the matter? All the joking had turned into reality in that short time!

But Tavia was surely not suffering any pain, thought Dorothy, as she seemed so sleepy and did not even murmur when Miss Higley gave her the fever medicine. It flashed across Dorothy's mind that it might have been better to have acquainted Miss Higley with the way Tavia's attack came on

— to tell her of the scene before the mirror — but somehow, Dorothy felt that she should not be told — that it would be easier for Tavia if her strange actions were not mentioned to any one — even to Tavia herself. Dorothy felt the matter would not be a pleasant one to discuss.

And as no one knew it but Dorothy, she would keep it to herself, unless some development in Tavia's illness would make it necessary to give the entire history of the case.

With a head almost bursting, it seemed, from the stress of the complication of worry and anxiety, Dorothy finally settled down on Miss Higley's cretonne couch, while the teacher tried to make herself comfortable in Dorothy's place, and Tavia Travers lay still and heavy with a fever, all unconscious of the changes that were going on about her.

CHAPTER V

AN UNTIMELY LETTER

For three days after that eventful night Tavia was obliged to keep to her room. She had a fever — from a cold the doctor thought — nothing contagious he was positive — but, as a precautionary measure Dorothy was given another room, until the fever should be entirely broken.

But the two friends were not to be separated much longer, for Tavia had quite recovered now, and was up and about her room, receiving notes and flowers from the girls, and recuperating generally.

"The first good rest I've had in months," Tavia told Dorothy, as they sat together again on the little window seat, looking out on the tennis court.

"I do really believe you look better than you did before you were taken ill," agreed Dorothy, giving her friend a look of unmistakable admiration.

"That's lucky for me," Tavia replied with something that sounded like a sigh.

"Why?" asked Dorothy in some surprise.

"Oh, nothing," was the answer, given rather evasively. "But a girl can't afford to get scrawny. Fancy yourself slinking down like a cornstalk in the fall! Why, even the unapproachable Dorothy Dale could not well stand the slinking process, to say nothing of an ordinary gawk like me going through it," and Tavia slyly looked into the mirror. She evidently had some particular reason for being so anxious about her good looks.

Dorothy had been noticing this peculiarity of Tavia's for some time — she had been so extreme about her toilet articles — using cold cream to massage her face daily, then brushing her hair ardently every night, to say nothing of the steam baths she had been giving her face twice a week.

All this seemed very strange to Dorothy, but when she laughed at Tavia's new-found pastimes the latter declared she was going to look nice for the summer; and that any girl who did not take care of herself externally was quite as blamable as she who neglected the hidden beauty of heart or brain.

And there was no denying that the "grooming" added much to the charms of Tavia's per-

sonality. Her hair was now wonderfully glossy, her cheeks delicately pink, her arms round and her hands so shapely! All this, applied to a girl who formerly protested against giving so much as half an hour daily to her manicure needs!

Dorothy was anxious to have a serious talk with Tavia, but considered it too soon after her illness to bring about that conversation, so she only smiled now as Tavia set all her creams and stuffs in a row, then stretched herself out "perfectly flat to relax," as the book directions called for. Fancy Tavia doing a thing like that!

"When I dare — that is as soon as that old Rip Van Winkle of a doctor lets me off," said Tavia suddenly, "I'm going to get a set of exercisers for myself. I don't believe we have half enough muscle work."

"Why, my dear, one would imagine you were training for the circus ring," said Dorothy laughing.

"Hardly," replied the other. "I never was keen on bouncing, and circus turns all end with a bounce in the net. Those nets make me creepy — a mattress for mine when on the rebound. Have you been to the post-office?"

"No, but I'm going. Want any stamps?"

"No. But if — if you get a letter for me I

wish you wouldn't put it into Mrs. Pangborn's box — I expect a little note from a girl, and I'm sure it need not be censored, as the rest of the letters are."

"But the rule," Dorothy reminded her gently.

"I believe the United States postal laws are of more importance than the silly, baby rules of Glenwood school," snapped Tavia with unexpected hauteur, "and it's against the law for one person to open the letters of another."

"But Mrs. Pangborn takes the place of our mothers — she is really our guardian when we enter her school. We agree to the rules before we are taken in."

"No, we were 'taken in' when we agreed to the rules," persisted the other. "Now, as it's your turn to do the post office this week, I think you might do me a little favor — I assure you the letter I expect is not from some boy. Other girls can smuggle boys' letters in, and yet I can't contrive to get a perfectly personal note from a perfectly sensible girl, without the missive being passed upon by — google-eyed Higley!"

"Oh, Tavia! And she was so kind to you when you were sick."

"Was she? Then she ought to keep it up, and leave my letters alone!"

"Well," sighed Dorothy rising, "I must go for the mail at any rate."

"And you won't save my one little letter?"

"How could I?" Dorothy pleaded.

"Then if you do get it — see it among the others — couldn't you leave it there? I will be able to walk down to the post office myself tomorrow."

"But you couldn't get the mail."

"Oh, yes I could," and Tavia tossed her head about defiantly.

Dorothy was certainly in a dilemma. But she was almost due at the post-office, and could not stay longer to argue, so, clapping on her hat, she bade Tavia good-bye for a short time.

"It palls on me," Tavia told herself, as she again approached the glass and took up the cold cream jar. "Who would ever believe that I would stoop so low! To deceive my own darling Dorothy! And to make a fool of myself with this 'mugging' as Nat would say."

She dropped heavily into a chair. The thought of Dorothy and Nat had a strange power over the girl — she seemed ashamed to look at her own face when the memory of her dearest friends brought her back again to the old time Tavia —

the girl free from vanity and true as steel to Dorothy Dale.

"But the letter," thought Tavia, recovering herself. "If that letter gets into Mrs. Pangborn's hands!"

Again she buried her face in her arms. Something seemed to sway her, first one way, then the other. What had caused her to change so in those last few short months? Why were her words so hollow now? Her own "copyrighted" slang no longer considered funny, even by those girls most devoted to her originality? And why, above all else, had she fallen ill after that queer dream about making-up with the cold cream and the red crayon?

"I'm afraid my mind was not built for secrets," she concluded, "and if I keep on moping this way I can't say what will happen next."

Meanwhile Dorothy was making her way back from the village with the letters including one addressed to Octavia Travers. She had determined not to make any attempt at giving the note to Tavia without the school principal's knowledge, for, somehow she feared Tavia's honesty in such matters, and, although Dorothy felt certain that Tavia would do nothing she really believed to be

wrong, she was afraid her chum might be misled by some outside influence.

With a heavy heart Dorothy laid the mail down on Mrs. Pangborn's desk. That lady was just coming into the office as Dorothy was about to leave.

"Wait, dear," said Mrs. Pangborn, "until I see if there is any mail for the girls in your corridor. How is Octavia to-day? I hope she will be able to go out by Sunday. Here, I guess this is a letter for her." Dorothy almost turned pale as the principal took up the small blue envelope. "Just take it to her — perhaps it will cheer her up, and she handed Dorothy the missive without attempting to open it or question the postmark. "There, I guess that is all I can give you," and she put the others in her desk. "Tell Tavia I am anxious to see her out of doors again, and I hope her letter will have good news for her."

Dorothy turned away with a smile of thanks, not venturing to say a word. She held the blue envelope in her hand, as if it was some tainted thing, for she well knew that the missive was not from home, the postmark "Rochester" standing out plainly on the stamped corner.

Tavia saw her coming, and quickly caught sight of the envelope in her hand.

"There, you old darling!" she exclaimed, giving Dorothy a vigorous hug. "I knew you would bring it to me. How you did ever manage it?"

"Mrs. Pangborn sent it with kind wishes that it might contain good news," stammered Dorothy. "I made no attempt to get it to you without her knowledge."

"She had it? And gave it back to you? Why, Dorothy, if she had — but of course it would not really have mattered," and Tavia slipped the letter into her blouse. "I'm awfully obliged. Did you hear from home?"

"No," answered Dorothy simply, a flush covering her fair face as she saw Tavia hide the letter. "I'm going out for a few minutes — so you may read that very important note, Tavia."

CHAPTER VI

ON THE LAWN

"WHEN I was a very small girl," exclaimed Mollie Richards, otherwise known as Dick, "I used to hope I would die young so I could escape the tooth-filling process, but here I am, doing these dreadful exams. and I haven't died yet."

"Never despair," quoted Rose-Mary. "The worst is yet to come."

"Cheer up, fellows," lisped little Nita Brandt, "We've been promised a clam-bake when it's all over."

"Yes, I fancy it will be all over with me when that clam-bake arrives," sighed Edna Black. "Since Tavia has 'turned turtle' I don't even have the fun of sneezing for exercise."

"It's an ill wind — and so on," ventured Dick. "That was a most abominable habit of yours — sneezing when you were too lazy to open your mouth to laugh."

"But I never would have believed that Tavia would get so — so —"

"Batty," finished Amy Brooks. "It's slang, but I know of no English word into which the explicit 'batty' may be translated."

"And Tavia of all girls," added Ned, ponderingly.

"But it seems to agree with her," declared Cologne. "Haven't you noticed her petal complexion?"

"Too much like the drug store variety," objected Nita. "I like something more substantial."

"Sour grapes," fired back Ned, who could always be depended on to take Tavia's part. "Yours is so perfect —"

"Oh, I know — freckles," admitted the confused Nita with a pout. "Fair skins always freckle."

"Then why don't you close the 'fair' and raffle off," suggested Dick. "Much easier than sleeping in lemon juice every night."

"Molly Richards, you're too smart!" snapped the abused one.

"Not altogether so," replied Dick. "At least this abominable French can't prove it. I have always believed that the only way to acquire a good French accent would be to get acute ton-

silitis. Then one might choke out the gutterals beautifully."

The girls of Glenwood school were supposed to be busy preparing for examinations. They had congregated in little knots, out of doors, scattering under the leafing oaks, and the temptation to gossip was evidently more than mere girls could withstand amid such surroundings.

"There's Dorothy now," announced Cologne, as the latter turned into the path.

"Yes, and there's Tavia," followed Ned, showing keen pleasure as the late absent one made her appearance on the lawn.

"Now we will have a chance to study her complex —" lisped Nita with rather a malicious tone.

"Suit you better to study your complex — verbs," snapped Ned, while Tavia and Dorothy came up at that moment.

Profuse greetings were showered upon Tavia, for the girls were well pleased to have her back with them, and it must be admitted that every eye which turned toward her came back in an unanimous vote "beautiful." Even Nita did not dare cast a dissenting glance — she could not, for indeed Tavia had improved wonderfully, as we have seen, under the "grooming."

Her hazel eyes shown brighter than ever in her clear peach-blow skin, her hair was not now "too near red" as Nita had been in the habit of declaring, but a true chestnut brown, and as "glossy as her new tan shoes," whispered Ned to Cologne.

Tavia wore her brown gingham dress, and much to the surprise of her companions, had "her neck turned in."

"What happened to your collar?" asked Dick, with a merry twinkle in her eyes.

"I happened to it," answered Tavia promptly. "No sense in having one's neck all marked up from collars — going about advertising capital punishment."

"Behold the new woman! We will make her president of our peace conference. But of course we would not expect her to settle her own 'squabs' with Nita. We will have a committee of subs, for that department of the work," said Cologne as she made room for Dorothy at her side, being anxious to get a private word with her. Tavia found a place between Ned and Dick, and soon the others were at least pretending to be at their books, realizing that too much time had already been wasted on outside matters.

The morning typified one of those rare days

in June, and the girls on the lawn were like human spring blossoms — indeed what is more beautiful than a wholesome, happy young girl?

She need not be especially beautiful in feature, for health and happiness make her irresistible to the real student of beauty, and the wonderful charm of human life seems nowhere to be so perfectly depicted as in the personality of a young girl.

"At last," announced Lena Berg, rolling over as the bell for recreation sounded, ending the period of open-air study usually allowed at this season.

Instantly the others were on their feet, and, as quickly had paired off for their favorite pastime. Ned and Tavia were together, Dorothy was with Cologne, and the others had selected their companions to suit their particular fancy.

"Say, Parson," began Cologne, using the name made for Dorothy from her initials "D. D.," and placing her arm about Dorothy's waist, "we've got a great scheme on. We're going swimming!"

"Swimming!" Dorothy almost screamed.

"Exactly that," insisted Cologne. "Mrs. Pangborn has given the permission and we are to go to Squinty Lake to-morrow afternoon."

"Squinty Lake?" echoed Dorothy in surprise.

"Well, they call it Sunset, you know, but Ned declares it is 'Squinty' as no one can look out of the front of her eyes on the shores of it. But isn't it too giddy — to go swimming so early. And to think that Higley is the best swimmer of the respected faculty. Now if our dear little Camille Crane were here — Feathers, you know. But I don't suppose she will be back to the bench this season. Wasn't it too bad she should break down?" rattled on Cologne. "But for the swimming! Aren't you perfectly delighted? You haven't said a single word."

"Why I haven't had a chance," replied Dorothy laughing. "Of course it is lovely to think you can go."

"I can go! Aren't you going?"

"I don't believe so. Tavia is so fond of swimming, and I am sure she would not dare go in the water so soon after her fever. So I guess I'll stay home to keep her company."

"Oh, you silly!" exclaimed Cologne. "Why should you stay out on her account?" and, possibly there was a note of jealousy in the girl's tone, and a hint of it in her manner. "I'm very sure she wouldn't do as much for you."

"Indeed she would, Cologne," Dorothy hurried to say. "You have no idea how kind Tavia can be and has been to me. Why, when I was sick home in Dalton, she stayed with me night and day."

"Well, I can't see why you shouldn't go in bathing when you get a chance. Precious seldom the chance comes at Glenwood."

"I suppose Mrs. Pangborn has hired the beach," ventured Dorothy.

"Yes, worse luck. Afraid any one would see our orphan asylum bathing suits."

"Indeed, I think those brown suits very pretty," objected Dorothy. "I thought so when I saw them taken out this spring. Of course I have never worn one."

"Of course you haven't," agreed Cologne. "That's why you like 'em, but you should try to swim dog fashion in one of those knickerbockers. The skirts are built for hoops, but they seemed to run short of goods on the bloomers."

"But it is awfully good of Mrs. Pangborn to provide for bathing when we will soon be at our own summer quarters for it."

"Yes, I admitted that much at the start, if you will remember. But, really, Doro, you had better

make up your mind to go in. It's all nonsense to stay out to keep Tavia company. I'm sure she would rather see you in the swim."

"I'll see," answered Dorothy, as they turned back into the path that led to the Hall.

CHAPTER VII

AT SUNSET LAKE

THE day following proved to be one of those exceptionally warm days that occasionally come at the end of June, with the express purpose, it would seem, of making life unbearable for those engaged in finishing up a term at school. All the morning the Glenwood pupils lived on the thoughts of the promised swim, to come that afternoon. When dismissal hour did finally drag around little attention was paid to luncheon, all minds and hearts being set on the jaunt to Sunset Lake. This was a summer resort not far from the school, and there was a good sandy stretch for bathing. The season had hardly opened yet, and Mrs. Pangborn was thus able to hire for that afternoon the exclusive right of the sandy shore for her pupils.

Dorothy and Tavia were to go, although neither expected to take the lake bath, for Dorothy was firm in her resolve to stay with Tavia, and so forego one of her favorite pastimes, for

Dorothy Dale was counted an excellent swimmer.

In high glee the party started off, under the chaperonage of Miss Higley, and even those pupils who insisted that she was "a bear" were forced to admit that, on this occasion, she was "as meek as a lamb." The fact was that Miss Higley loved swimming, and knew she was expert at the exercise. So the promised sport was especially welcome to her.

Along the shady road to the lake Dorothy laughed and chatted as merrily as did the others, but Tavia was inclined to pout. She had begged to be allowed to go into the water, declaring that she was entirely recovered and that the swim would do her good. But Mrs. Pangborn would not consent, so Tavia was to take what enjoyment she could derive from watching the others.

When the Glenwood girls reached Sunset Beach the entrance gate to the bathing grounds was locked against all outsiders. A row of bathing houses was placed at the disposal of the young ladies, and there was a matron in attendance. In fact, the pleasure grounds were turned over entirely to Mrs. Pangborn's pupils and the presence of the white-aproned attendant gave the place a look of the utmost propriety. On this occasion, likewise, the life guard was banished, and, as Dick

expressed it, "there never was a man in sight when the girls in brown took their annual."

While the others were "making themselves frog-like" in the aforementioned suits, Dorothy and Tavia established themselves in an old boat on the shore of the lake.

It was their first visit to the resort as it was their first summer term at Glenwood, and the two girls were charmed with the pretty, picturesque surroundings.

"Not much like our pond in Dalton," Tavia observed, viewing the placid lake with its great open expanse of sunlit waters.

"No, but that was a splendid little pond for swimming," Dorothy reminded her companion, never relishing any aspersions thrown in the direction of "dear old Dalton."

Soon some of the girls appeared on the little boardwalk bordering the lake, and, in unheard of politeness, waited for Miss Higley to come out and take the first plunge. That formality being over there was a wild rush for the water, each one of the girls expecting to have a better time than any of the others.

Nita Brandt and Adele Thomas had not yet learned to swim, so these two were provided with a pair of water-wings to support them, and they

"floundered around like a couple of ferry boats," Tavia declared, as they made all sorts of vain attempts to strike out like the others.

Dick and Cologne were soon engaged in a race, from one float to the other, doing the overhand stroke, and making a fine showing for the first of the season efforts.

"You're exceeding the speed limit!" shouted Tavia from the boat, as she stood up in the stern and viewed the race with unconcealed interest.

"Get out of the way!" called a dozen voices as the twain with their water-wings anchored directly in Dick's course.

But the girls floating on the wings could not get upon their feet for they were in water about up to their heads. Every effort they made to touch bottom seemed to send their faces down, while simultaneously two pair of stockings would shoot up above the surface of the lake.

Miss Higley instantly realized that Nita and Adele were out too far — that they were beyond their depth and therefore in danger should the wings (which were muslin bags blown up) burst or slip from under their arms. She did not wait to see the result of the race, but struck out for the now thoroughly frightened girls, who were calling in vain for some one to help them to shore.

As Miss Higley reached them, Dick and Cologne, who had not grasped the situation, came gliding up to the same spot, almost side by side, working earnestly, each to outdistance the other in reaching the float which was the goal.

"Here!" shouted Miss Higley to them. "Stop! Never mind the race! Help get these two girls in. They're exhausted!"

The two swimmers veered around to Nita and Adele. Yes, Nita was gasping! She had evidently swallowed considerable water. And Adele could not attempt another stroke — her limbs seemed paralyzed.

Without speaking, thinking to save her breath for the struggle, Cologne took a position between the badly frightened girls, while Miss Higley and Dick swung around so that each could grasp an arm, one of Nita and the other of Adele. In this manner the three swimmers towed to shore those who had ventured too far on the water-wings.

For a few minutes there was plenty of excitement at Sunset Beach, everyone gathering around the rescued ones, suggesting both restoratives and punishments to close the incident.

Miss Higley quietly waited for the girls to recover their breaths and other faculties that had been temporarily suspended during the mishap,

and then asked why they had ventured out so far.

"We didn't," gulped Nita. "We just stayed perfectly still and we kept going along."

"Well," finished Miss Higley, "you must not again get on those wings without some one at hand to help you, or until you can manage them better. I'm thankful nothing worse happened."

So Nita and Adele, much chagrined and more disappointed, were obliged to spend the remainder of their swimming time with Dorothy and Tavia on the beach, as wading did not suit them after their attempt at swimming, unsuccessful as it had proven.

As the afternoon waned the interest in the water exercise grew keener, and those who could trust themselves were indulging in all sorts of "stunts," sliding down an inclined wooden chute, and diving from a spring board. Miss Higley posted herself near the danger line, realizing that she must act as guard and look out for the safety of the swimmers.

Presently some one suggested an endurance trial, and this attracted almost all the girls away from the chute over toward the stretch of deep water.

But Edna Black did not join the racers. She had never before tried "shooting the chutes" and was infatuated with the sport. Time after time

she climbed the little ladder and as quickly slid down the curved, inclined plank into the water again. Dorothy and Tavia were watching her from the shore, calling to her in merry nonsense and joking about her sliding propensities.

"Going down!" called Tavia as Edna took one more slide.

They waited — but she did not come up!

Miss Higley, too, was watching for the young diver's re-appearance.

Ten — twenty — she counted, but Edna did not come up. Then, from the very top of the slide, where she had taken her position some time before to better watch all the girls, Miss Higley dove into the water after Edna, cleaving the fifteen feet of distance from the surface like a flash.

Dorothy and Tavia stood breathless — watching for either Miss Higley or Edna to come to the top.

It seemed ages — yes, it was too long to stay under water. What had happened to Miss Higley? Where was Edna?

An instant later, Dorothy and Tavia — without exchanging a word — kicked off their slippers and were in the water! There was no time to call to the girls farther out. Not a swimmer was near enough to offer help!

Their light summer clothing seemed to make little difference to these two country girls, who had learned to swim in Dalton pond, and, in a few seconds, both had reached the spot where Edna and the teacher had disappeared.

Tavia was the first to dive, and, in a few seconds she came up with Edna, white and unconscious, in her arms.

"Hold her — while I try — for Miss Higley!" cried Dorothy, as Tavia, supporting her burden on one arm and grasped the cross bar of the chute with her other and yelled for help.

Dorothy was now under water, groping for the other lost one. But she had to come up for air without bringing Miss Higley.

Down she went again, taking a long breath and determining to remain under until she could get a grip on the clothing of the teacher. Now the others were close at hand to assist Tavia in caring for Edna. Down and down Dorothy went, the water gurgling in her ears — down and down into the depths.

It seemed as if she could not stand the strain and pressure. A trail of bubbles and a swirl of the surface of the lake marked where she had disappeared.

Rose-Mary and Dick were the first to reach

Tavia, and they at once took charge of the unconscious one, floating her to shore between them. Then others came up to the chute, white, frightened and trembling at the news Tavia gasped out to them. So alarmed were they that none of them dared venture to help Dorothy down there in the blackness and silence, at her grewsome task.

Tavia, as soon as she had recovered her breath, had started off to assist Dick and Rose-Mary in bringing Edna to shore, as the task was no light one for the three swimmers. Then, as she got into shallow water Tavia turned, suddenly remembering something, and shouted to the girls about the chute:

"Go for Dorothy! She is under there, looking for Miss Higley!"

But, as one or two of the braver girls, feeling the need of action, prepared to dive, they saw the pale face of Dorothy Dale come to the surface, and they saw that, in her arms, she held clasped the form of Miss Higley. But the hand that Dorothy stretched out to grasp the bottom of the chute, that she might support herself and the inert burden, just failed to catch hold of the wooden brace, and, amid a swirl of waters Dorothy went down again, out of sight, with the unconscious teacher.

CHAPTER VIII

A LIVELY AFTERNOON

THERE followed an eternity of suspense for those watching for the reappearance of Dorothy. The missing of the hold she expected to get on the board and the effort to keep Miss Higley up, together with the struggle she had gone through, caused the girl to lose all control of herself. She had sunk instantly without having any opportunity of using her free arm to keep herself above water.

Seeing this Rose-Mary and Molly, who had climbed out on the base of the chute, jumped into the lake again, making for the spot where they saw Dorothy go down the second time.

But before they could reach it they saw Dorothy's head above the surface. She had come up under the chute, in an open square of water, formed by the four supporting posts of the affair. Cautiously she reached out and caught hold of a beam. Then another arm was seen to grasp a projecting plank! Miss Higley was struggling!

She was not dead! Not unconscious!

"Dorothy!" screamed Tavia from shore, as she say the form of her chum come to the surface the second time. But Tavia did not see Dorothy wave a reassuring hand at her as she climbed up on the chute, and helped Miss Higley support herself across one of the base planks. For Tavia had fallen unconscious beside Edna, who was only just beginning to show signs of life under the prompt administrations of Rose-Mary and Dick.

In all this confusion the white-aproned matron forgot to use her telephone. But, as she now assisted the other girls in working over Edna, she directed some of the swimmers, who had come to shore, to look after Tavia.

Lena Berg, the quietest girl of Glenwood, rushed into the bathing office and telephoned to Central to "send doctors." Almost before those working over Edna and Tavia had realized it, and, almost as soon as the throng of young ladies had started to assist Miss Higley and Dorothy to shore, an automobile with two doctors in it stopped at the gate. The physicians were soon working over Tavia and Edna.

A few seconds later Rose-Mary and Molly pulled up to shore in an old boat they had found anchored near the chute, and in the craft, which

they rowed with a broken canoe paddle, were Dorothy and Miss Higley!

As so often happens that one small accident is responsible for any number of mishaps, especially where girls or women become panic-stricken, it seemed now that the rescue of Miss Higley and Dorothy acted like magic to restore all four victims of the water to their senses, at least, if not to actual vigor. Tavia and Edna both jumped up as the boat grounded on the beach, and Miss Higley and Dorothy staggered ashore.

"Be careful," cautioned one of the physicians, as the teacher was seen to totter, and almost fall. She was plainly very weak, and, while the younger doctor looked after Dorothy the other, who was his father, took Miss Higley into the bathing pavilion office to administer to her there.

Tavia had only fainted. Indeed she had been scarcely able to swim out to help Edna, not being entirely recovered from her recent nervous fever. Edna had swallowed considerable water, but it was fresh, and when she had been relieved of it, and the usual restoratives applied, she, too, was herself again.

Dorothy insisted there was absolutely nothing the matter with her, but it was plain that such

physical efforts as she had been obliged to make in her rescue of Miss Higley, must at least exhaust a girl of her frail physique. So young Dr. Morton insisted on her being assisted in a "thorough rub." Then she was given a warm, stimulating drink, and, soon after that, Dorothy was able to tell what had happened.

An hour later all the brown bathing suits had been discarded, Tavia and Dorothy had been supplied with dry clothing, and all the Glenwood girls who had come to Sunset Lake sat on the rocky shore back of the sand, waiting for the hour to arrive when they must start back to the school. There was no lack of talk to make the time pass quickly.

Miss Higley seemed the least perturbed of any — she had a way of always being beyond a mere personal feeling. She never "allowed herself" to encourage pains or aches; in fact she was one of those strong-minded women who believe that all the troubles of this life are hatched in the human brain, and, therefore the proper cure for all ills is the eradication of the germ producer — sick-thoughts. So, as soon as she felt her lungs in working order again she "took the defensive" as Tavia expressed it, and sat up as "straight as a

whip," with her glasses at exactly the proper pitch and the black cord at precisely the accustomed dangle.

"Mar-vel-ous!" gasped Dick, aside, giving the long word an inimitable roll, and, at the same time, bestowing a wondering look on the recently resuscitated teacher.

"But do tell us," begged Rose-Mary, "what happened first — of all those exciting things?"

"I did," answered Edna Black. "I was shooting the chute to my heart's content, when, all of a sudden, I stuck somewhere. Then, after trying everything I knew how to do to get loose, I said my prayers."

"Next," called Rose-Mary, indicating Tavia.

"Well, of course," began Tavia, "Dorothy and I were not to go near the water, but when we saw Edna turn up missing we just kicked off our slippers and, in the language of the poets, 'got busy.' I found Ned here, first shot, stuck in between the two corner boards of the chute posts. She didn't need any coaxing to come up, once I untangled her skirt from a nail which held it fast, and I brought her up without any unnecessary explanations."

"And, in the meantime Miss Higley had gone down," interjected Dorothy. "That is she went down after Edna first."

"And came up last," added the teacher, with a significant nod to Dorothy.

"How did you find Miss Higley, Parson?" Rose-Mary continued to question, with a view to getting the entire story.

"I found her in a mud hole, held fast, but able to help herself somewhat. Then I — I got her up — somehow — ."

"Indeed I was almost unconscious until you dragged my head up to the air," Miss Higley hastened to say, anxious to give Dorothy her due, for certainly the rescue was a matter of heroic effort, and Miss Higley, being heavy, and, at the same time, unable to help herself, gave Dorothy the most difficult of all the surprising tasks of that eventful afternoon.

"But when she sank that time — like a stone," suggested Dick to Dorothy.

"Oh, I merely missed catching hold of a plank and I had to go down — I couldn't keep up."

"Certainly; why not?" put in Nita Brandt, glad to be able to say something "safe."

"And you, Lispy," said Lena to Nita. "You and Adele started the epidemic with your water wings. Next time make it life preservers."

The girlish spirits, "bottled up" during the period of worry came out with a resounding

"pop" now, and the walk home proved even pleasanter than the one to the beach.

"For now," declared Ned, between her jokes, "we are like the man who laughed at the ugly cow from inside the fence — he found it much funnier to laugh at the cow from outside the fence."

CHAPTER IX

DOROTHY AND TAVIA

For more than a week after the happenings at Sunset Lake the pupils of Glenwood School had little time for anything outside of the regular program of the institution. It was a matter of sleep, eat, exercise, then study and recite, and then the same schedule was begun all over again the following day. But this was the end of the term and so much remained to be done that it was necessary to "keep going" as the girls expressed it, so that the "last day" would find the records of the year's work up to the usual high standard.

"This mental house-cleaning is perfectly terriblocious!" declared Tavia one morning, showing her appitude at coining alleged new words, this one being a "contraction" of terrible and ferocious.

"But how nice it will be when we are ail done," Dorothy reminded her, taking up her books and papers, to attend the last exercise in mathematics.

"Perhaps," sighed Tavia.

The conversation was ended abruptly by the sound of the bell summoning the girls to class, and they went back to the "house-cleaning," each doing her best to finish honorably, in spite of the difference of their respective motives.

That evening Dorothy and Tavia went to their room early. Tavia seemed tired, and Dorothy did not wish to disturb her by coming in later.

Neither appeared inclined to talk, and, as Tavia went through her elaborate toilet preparations (the facial massage and all the accompaniments) Dorothy watched her in silence.

Strange as it was to believe Tavia so vain, Dorothy had become accustomed to this nightly process, and now accepted it without comment. Neither had she ever told Tavia of that night when, in her sleep, she had gone through the making-up process.

But school would soon be over — and then —

For some time Dorothy had been putting off a talk she desired to have with Tavia — a talk about their vacation plans. Somehow she dreaded to undertake the topic that Tavia had been so obviously avoiding. But to-night Dorothy felt that she must have an understanding — she must know where her room-mate intended to spend her vacation.

Dorothy was just about to broach the subject when Tavia suddenly turned to her with this surprising question:

"Dorothy, do you think I'm pretty?"

"Why, of course you are," stammered Dorothy. "You know I have always thought you — pretty."

"But I do not mean what you always thought, Doro. I am awfully serious now. Am I really pretty?"

"I don't know," replied her chum. "I could not tell what others might think — but I have always thought you the prettiest kind of a girl — you know that."

"But do you think that in — in a crowd I might be considered — attractive? Are my features good? Do I look — look interesting?"

This was said with such apparent simplicity that Dorothy almost laughed. There stood a pretty girl — without question a remarkably pretty girl — of a most unusual type — and she was begging for a compliment — no, for an opinion of her personality!

Dorothy did not answer. She could not possibly say that at that moment Tavia was a perfect vision, as she stood in her white robe, with her freshly-brushed hair framing the outline of her

sweet, young face. But the girl before the mirror wanted to know.

"Dorothy, do tell me," she begged. "What do you think? Am I pretty, or not?"

"Tavia," exclaimed Dorothy suddenly, "tell *me,* why do you want to know?"

"Why," and Tavia laughed a little to gain time, "I think any girl ought to know just — what she is like."

"But all this — this fussing. Why do you do it?"

"To experiment," and Tavia laughed lightly. "They say one can do wonders with a little care. I am tired of reading that in the magazines so I thought I would just try it." She had finished with the glycerine and rose water now, so the "stuffs" were put away and Tavia sank down with a "glad-of-it" sigh.

"Of course," began Dorothy, breaking into the topic of summer vacation, "you will go home first, before you come to North Birchland. You will want to see everybody in Dalton — I wish I could go along with you. But I have no home in Dalton now."

"Come with me," suggested Tavia. "We have plenty of room."

"Oh, I was only romancing. Of course I should like to see everybody in dear old Dalton, but I have to go to daddy and the boys. Isn't it splendid to have a vacation? It makes school worth while."

"Yes," replied Tavia, vaguely, preparing to turn out the light.

"When do you think you will come to North Birchland?" asked Dorothy directly.

"I can't tell. I expect to visit Grace Barnum in Buffalo. Her folks are old friends of mother's. I had a letter from her yesterday, especially inviting me."

"Oh, did you?" and Dorothy looked surprised. "I did not hear you speak of going to Buffalo. I thought you intended to come to Birchland as soon as you had seen your folks. You know Aunt Winnie expects you. And so do the boys."

"Oh, I'll get to the Birches some time during the summer I guess," Tavia hurried to say, as she noted Dorothy's disappointment. "You can depend upon it I expect to have some of the fine times — you are not to have a monopoly of the good things."

"Then you are going to Dalton first, then to Buffalo, and what time do you count on getting to

Birchland?" persisted Dorothy, determined to know, if possible, just what Tavia's plans really were.

"Oh, my dear," and Tavia indulged in a discordant yawn, "do let's go to sleep. I'm almost dead."

"But, Tavia, you always make some excuse when I ask you about vacation," and Dorothy's tone was in no way drowsy — she certainly was not sleepy.

"And you always ask such unreasonable questions," retorted Tavia. "Just as if I can tell what may happen between now and — midsummer."

"Tavia!" exclaimed Dorothy with a sob. "I feel just as if something dreadful was going to happen. I don't know why but you — you have — changed so," and the girl buried her head in her pillow and cried as if something "dreadful" had really happened.

"Doro, dear," and Tavia clasped the weeping girl in her arms, "what can be the matter? What have I done? You know I love you better than anyone in the whole world, and now you accuse me of changing!"

"But you have changed," insisted Dorothy, sobbing bitterly. "Everybody is talking about it.

And if you knew what a time I have had trying — trying to stand up for you!"

"To stand up for me!" repeated Tavia. "What have I done that need provoke comment? Surely it is my own business if I do not choose to be the school monkey any longer. Let some of the others turn in and serve on the giggling committee. I think I have done my share!"

"Oh, it isn't that," and Dorothy jabbed her handkerchief into her eyes, "but you are so — so different. You always seem to be thinking of something else."

"Something else!" and Tavia tried to laugh. "Surely it is no crime to be — thoughtful?"

"Well, I think it is perfectly dreadful for a girl to go and grow straight up — without any warning."

"What an old lady I must be," and Tavia looked very severe and dignified. "But, Doro dear, you need not worry. You surely believe I would never do anything I really thought wrong."

"That's just it. You would not think it wrong, but suppose you did something that turned out to be wrong?"

Tavia made no answer but the "old lady" look came back into her face — that serious expression so new to her. She seemed to be looking far

ahead — far away — at some uncertain, remote possibility.

For several minutes neither girl spoke. They could hear the "miscreants" who had been out after hours creeping past their door. Every one in Glenwood should be asleep. The last hall light had just been turned out — but the girls from Dalton were still thinking.

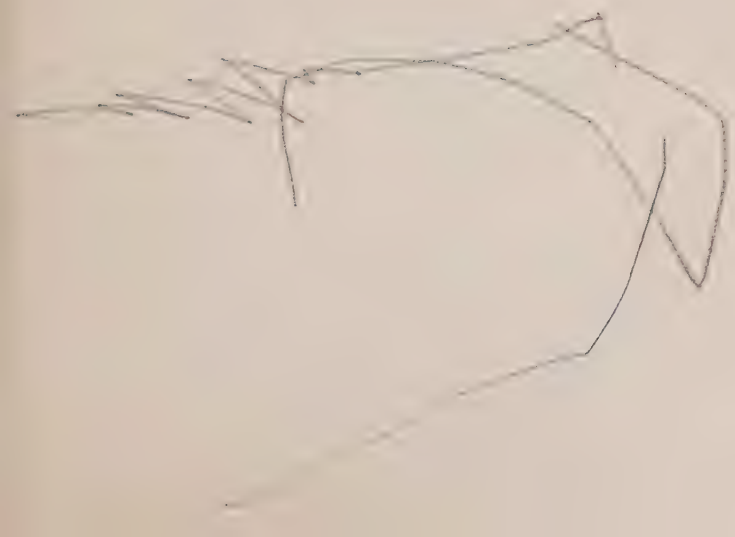
Dorothy, usually the one to mend matters, tonight seemed sullen and resolute. Plainly Tavia was hiding something from her, and while Dorothy could bear with any amount of mistakes or impulsive little wrongdoings, she could not put up with a deliberate slight — a premeditated act of deception.

Tavia saw that she was bound to hold out — to insist upon a "clearing up," and, as this did not suit her, for reasons best known to herself, she attempted to pet Dorothy back to her usual forgiving mood.

But the storm that had been so long brewing was in no hurry to blow over, and Dorothy went to bed with swollen eyes and an aching head, while Tavia only pretended to sleep — she had an important letter to write — an answer to the one that had come in on the evening mail, and required to be replied to by return of post. This meant that

the missive must be penned that night and dropped in the post-office the very first thing in the morning.

" Dear little Dorothy," Tavia murmured as she looked down on the fair face, to make sure that the eyes were resting in sleep, " I will never do anything to disgrace *you*. Only have a little patience and you will understand it all. But I must — must — " and then she broke off with a long, long sigh.



CHAPTER X

LEAVING GLENWOOD

But one more day remained of the school term at Glenwood. All the tests had been concluded, and, as there were to be no formal exercises the "last day" was given over entirely to packing up, and making ready for the departure from the institution.

Dorothy and Tavia were busy with the others. To Dorothy the prospect of seeing her dear ones so soon, filled every thought of this day's work. Tavia, too, seemed more like her old self and "jollied the girls" as she flung things into her trunk with her usual disregard for order.

"They'll all have to come out again," she replied to Dorothy's remonstrance, "so what's the use of being particular how they go in?"

"But your pretty Christmas bag," begged Dorothy. "Do be careful not to crush that."

"Oh, indeed there's nothing to crush. I took the ribbons out of it for the neck and sleeves of my white lawn, and when I extracted them from

the flowered stuff there was nothing left but a perfectly flat piece of cretonne, with a row of little brass rings on one side. I just ran a bit of faded ribbon through the rings — and just wait until I show you."

At this Tavia plunged her hands down into the depths of her trunk and presently brought up the article in question.

"There!" she exclaimed, clapping the bag on her head. "Isn't that a pretty sunbonnet?"

Dorothy beheld it in amazement.

"It certainly does look sweet on you," she said, "but what in the world will you want a fancy sunbonnet for? Surely you will not use it in Dalton — and in Buffalo —"

"I think it would make a tremendous hit in Buffalo," declared Tavia, wheeling around to show off the effect of her thick brown hair beneath the little row of brass rings that held the ribbon which bound the bit of flowered stuff to her neck. At the front her face seemed to fit exactly, and surely nothing could be more becoming than that Christmas bag.

"Oh, I think it's a shame," faltered Dorothy, "to spoil that beautiful bag to make a plaything."

"But we all have to have 'playthings,'" said Tavia, with a strong accent on the word "play."

Then, with one more swing around, like a figure in a show case, Tavia took off the sunbonnet and went on with her packing.

"It seems so queer," Dorothy remarked, sliding her tennis racquet down the side of her trunk, "that we should be going in different directions. We have always been able to help each other in the packing before."

"Well, I'd just like to leave half my old truck behind," replied Tavia, "and I don't know but what I will have to if this trunk won't stretch a little. It's chock full now, and just look at the commotion on the floor."

"I told you," insisted Dorothy, "that you would have to put the things in differently. Now you will have to take them all out again and roll them up tight. You can get twice as much in that way."

"Take them all out!" Tavia almost shrieked. "Never!" And, following this exclamation the girl jumped into the trunk and proceeded to dance the "trunk traveler's jig" on the unfortunate collection of baggage.

"Tavia! Don't!" begged Dorothy. "I'm sure I heard something break."

"Oh, that was my last summer's hat breaking

up its plans for this year. I put it in the bottom in hopes that it would meet an untimely end, but I really did not intend to murder it," she joked, stepping out of the trunk.

"But at any rate," she went on, as she flung part of the "commotion" off the floor into the hollow she had succeeded in making for the various articles, "the poor old thing will take up less room dead than alive, and there will be no possible danger of my having to wear it for a turn or two when I get home. Nothing like getting in one's supplies while you're fresh — before the folks have a chance to get too friendly with you. I've found that out."

"But it was a real pretty hat."

"Well, even pretty hats are not immune from accidents, and you saw yourself that it was an accident — pure and simple."

A half hour later all the trunks had been packed, and the two Dalton girls sat in their little room exchanging confidences and making all sorts of school-girl promises of writing often, and sending pretty cards, besides having photographs taken of which to make especially affectionate remembrances.

"I'll send you one just as soon as I get to Buffa-

lo," Tavia declared, holding Dorothy very close, for the latter seemed much inclined to cry as the hour of parting drew near.

"But it will be so lonely in North Birchland without you," persisted Dorothy, with a sob. "I do wish you would give up that trip to Buffalo."

Tavia assured her chum that it would be impossible as she had promised Grace Barnum to go to her home to visit her.

Dorothy finally jumped up and made an effort to pull herself together. She went over to the dresser and picked up a book.

"Is this yours?" she began, and then stopped suddenly. It was a gust of wind that had blown up the thin strip of muslin covering the top of the dresser and revealed the little red book. It had been concealed there and, as Dorothy took it up she saw on the cover:

HOW TO ACT

The Beginner's Guide.

Tavia was at the other end of the room and did not at once see the book in Dorothy's hand.

"Did you — do you — want — this?" Dorothy stammered, again holding the volume out toward Tavia.

A deep flush instantly came over Tavia's face. Dorothy was watching her with a look — a look at once pleading and full of sadness.

Tavia put out her hand for the book.

"Oh, that funny little leaflet," she tried to say as if it were a joke. "I suppose I might just as well take it, but it's full of the worst sort of nonsense. Let me show you — "

"Oh, no; don't bother," replied Dorothy, rather stiffly. "But that seems a queer sort of a book to take home from boarding school. Hadn't you better destroy it, as you say it is all nonsense?"

The red covers of the pamphlet fluttered in Tavia's hand. The flush on her cheeks threatened to match the hue of the book and told its own guilty story.

"Oh, I might as well take it with me," and Tavia's words sounded rather a lame excuse. "It will be amusing to read on the train."

"Oh, Tavia!" Dorothy burst into tears. "Won't you give up — those stage notions? Do, please!" and she clasped her arms about her chum, weeping bitterly.

"Oh, don't! Dorothy don't cry so!" begged Tavia, stroking the yellow head. "I will give it up — all up! Yes, Dorothy, dear, I'm sten! Look here!" and at that Dorothy raised her head.

With her hands free Tavia tore the little red book into shreds and tossed them into the waste basket.

"There!" she exclaimed. "I'm through with — through with all of it! I don't want to know how to act! I'll never try! Dorothy! Dorothy!" and the miserable girl threw herself upon the bed in a frenzy of grief and excitement. "Just forgive me for it all — for trying to deceive you. I have been wretched all through it — and I only want you — and all the others — just as you used to be. I don't believe in ambition!" She stood upright. "I'll go home to dear, old Dalton, and stay there until — until I come to you at North Birchland."

When the other girls tapped on the door of room nineteen late that afternoon, to say good-bye, they found two very happy young maidens waiting for the particular carriage that was to take them to the depot. Dorothy and Tavia could not be separated. They clung to each other in spite of all the invitations to "do the rounds" and join in the last and noisiest fun of the season. Together, very demurely, they called at the office to say good-bye to the teachers.

When, at last, the carriage did come for them, Dorothy and Tavia rode off together — one bound

for the train to North Birchland, and the other going home — home to Dalton, to try to be happy in the little country town where she and Dorothy Dale had spent such a happy childhood, and where Tavia would find plenty of time to dream of things scattered far out in another world, that seemed like the golden fingers of ambition beckoning her on. To leave Dalton and the common school life — to enter the walks of city uncertainties — to become part of the great, grinding machine of human hardships — that machine which is always willing to stop its terrific speed long enough to gather into its cogs and meshes the life of an innocent young girl.

CHAPTER XI

A JOLLY HOME-COMING

"My! What great big boys! You can't possibly be my little baby brother Roger. And Joe! Why he is like a real young gentleman in his tennis suit!" And Dorothy kissed her brothers over and over again, as they rode from the depot in the pony cart to the home of Aunt Winnie, "The Cedars," at North Birchland.

"Oh, I don't know," drawled Joe, in his good-natured way. "You can't complain. You've been doing some growing on your own account."

"And you have got awfully pretty," lisped Roger, as he "snuggled" up closer to his sister. "I think you are just as perfectly handsome as any big lady."

"My, you little flatterbox!" and Dorothy gave him an oldtime squeeze. "You have learned more than your A, B, Cs. at kindergarten. I received all your letters but could not answer the last two as we had such an awful lot of writing to do at the close when examinations came."

"Did you pass?" asked the younger brother, by way of showing his understanding of the scholastic season.

"Oh, yes. I guess Tavia and I did about as well as the others."

"Why didn't Tavia come?" went on Roger.

"She is coming, later. You know she had to go home to Dalton first. Oh, how lovely The Cedars look! And there is daddy on the porch!"

Dorothy could scarcely remain in the cart as it rumbled along the shady drive that led to the broad veranda of Mrs. White's handsome summer residence. Major Dale was waiting to greet his daughter, and Aunt Winnie came down the steps as the cart drove up.

"Isn't she big!" exclaimed Roger, as the major folded Dorothy close in his arms in a most affectionate manner.

"My dear," whispered Mrs. White, pressing upon Dorothy's cheek a kiss of welcome. "You *have* grown!" and the glance that accompanied this simple remark spoke in more than words Mrs. White's admiration for her pretty niece, and told Dorothy at once, that her Aunt Winnie was entirely satisfied with the particular lines that "her growth" had taken on.

"You all look so well, and I am so glad to be

home again at last," said Dorothy as soon as she had a chance to express her opinion. "It is perfectly fine here."

"Here come the boys!" called Joe, who was just turning around on the long drive, preparatory to taking the cart to the stables, and presently Nat and Ned came bouncing up the steps.

Before Dorothy had a chance to protest both cousins were kissing her at once — Nat declaring he hadn't kissed a girl since he left Dorothy after the automobile ride at Glenwood, and the while Ned was insisting that his "little brother" should await his turn and allow the head of the house the rights of his lawful inheritance.

Such jolly big boys as were Ned and Nat always have a way of making things both lively and interesting, especially when a pretty girl cousin is "up for entertaining" and, for the remainder of the afternoon, they entirely monopolized Dorothy, while Joe and Roger looked on, satisfied to hear their sister's voice again. As for the major, he sat there perfectly content to see all his children about him once more, although it was a trifle odd to find Dorothy so grown up — almost a young lady. And it was so short a time ago that she would "climb all over him" when a little homecoming occurred. How she would fuss with his

hair, and complain that no one had attended to his brushes or kept his neck-ties pressed during her absence.

"But children must grow up," said the major with a sigh, "and Dorothy is a fine girl — a Dale — every inch of her!"

That Dorothy was indeed growing to be very handsome was a matter that Mrs. White contemplated with pardonable pride. Dorothy was now her especial charge; she would enter society under her safe chaperonage. Of course she would first finish her education; and the aunt hoped that her niece would not decide to take the higher branches, inasmuch as this would keep her longer separated from her relatives. There is plenty of time Mrs. White decided to learn in our own little world without spending precious time buried in colleges, forming ideas that are sure to conflict with the regular home life, and perhaps, depriving one's family of the most precious years of a girl's career — the time between morning and noon in the life of mortals.

That evening, while Dorothy was dressing for dinner, her aunt mentioned the matter to her.

"Of course, Dorothy dear," she said as she watched the girl arrange her beautiful hair, "it is all very well to take a college course if you think

you would not be satisfied to live in the home-world always. But your brothers are growing up, and a sister's influence is of so much account to growing lads. I hope you will be satisfied to stay home with us, after you have finished at Glenwood."

"I'm sure I'm very lonely away from you all," answered Dorothy, "and, as you say, it is not likely I will ever want to take up a profession. Therefore I can best finish my education along the lines I will be required to be most proficient in."

"That's my own Dorothy," said her aunt.

It was a merry party that sat down to the bountifully supplied table. Major Dale was, of course, at the head, and Mrs. White occupied the seat of honor at the other end, while Dorothy and Ned, then Nat and Joe, with Roger next his father, made up the family party.

Roger insisted on knowing just what Dorothy usually had for dinner at Glenwood, and upon learning how extremely simple the school menu was he decided at once he would never go to boarding school.

"When's Tavia coming?" asked Nat, endeavoring to hide his particular interest in that question by trying, prematurely to swallow an unusually large mouthful of food.

"She promised to come in a few weeks," an-

swered Dorothy. "She expects to visit Buffalo first."

"Buffalo?" repeated Nat, vaguely.

"Any objections?" asked Ned pointedly, to tease his younger brother.

"Well," replied Nat, lamely, "Buffalo is a big city and Tavia is — is — merely a little girl."

This remark only made matters worse for Nat, as the others joined in the "jollying" and he was obliged to admit that he did miss Tavia, and was very sorry she had decided not to visit Birchland first.

"I don't blame you, little brother," declared Ned. "Tavia certainly is a winner, and when it comes to an all-round jolly, good-natured — er — ah — um —help me out, Dorothy! Any new adjectives at Glenwood?"

"Try 'dandy,'" suggested Joe.

"Oh, great!" put in little Roger, to whom 'dandy' always meant something great.

"Thanks! Thanks!" acknowledged Ned. "I think if Lady Tavia stands for all of that she surely will be well done."

"Oh, she can stand for more than that," insisted her champion. "She once confided to me that she 'stood' for a colored baby. It was christened in the Dalton canal I believe, and no one, in

the crowd of spectators, had the nerve to stand for the little one but Tavia."

"And did she give him his name?" asked Roger, all at once interested in the black baby in the canal.

"She did for a fact," Nat replied. "Yes, Tavia called that coon Moses, and, if you don't believe it she still has an active interest in the modern human frog; let me tell you she sent him a goat cart on his last birthday."

"Oh, ho!" exclaimed Ned significantly. "So that was the goat cart you bought down at Tim's, eh? Now, I call that real romantic! Mother, you must include Mosey when next you invite folks from Dalton."

"Oh, yes, Aunty, please do," begged Roger, clapping his hands. "I just love little colored boys. They talk so funny and warble their eyes so."

"'Warble,'" repeated Nat. "Why not 'scramble'? Scrambled eyes would look real pretty, I think."

"Well," retorted Roger, "I watched a coon boy look that way one day and the — yolk of his eye stuck away up behind the — the cover. Yes it did — really," for the others were laughing at

him. "And I told him it was a good thing that the looker didn't rub off."

Everyone agreed with Roger that it was a very good thing that "lookers" didn't rub off, and so the small talk drifted from "Mose" to more substantial topics.

Directly after dinner Dorothy went to the library to sing and play for the major. She had, of course, improved considerably in her music, and when the usual favorites were given, including some war songs, besides "Two Little Boys in Blue" for Roger's special benefit, the boys kept her busy the remainder of the evening playing college songs, one after the other, for, as fast as they discovered they did not know one they would "make a try" at the next.

"Now they miss Tavia," whispered Mrs. White in an aside to the major. "She is a genius at funny songs. What she doesn't know she has a faculty for guessing at with splendid results."

"Yes indeed. It's a pity she didn't come along with Dorothy. They have always been inseparable, and I rather miss the little imp myself tonight," admitted the major.

But when the singers came to the old classics, "Seeing Nellie Home" Ned cut "Nellie" out

and substituted Tavia's name whereat Nat insisted that he could not stand any more of the "obsequies," and so broke up the performance with a heart-rending and ear-splitting discordant yell.

"Well, you'll feel better after that, old boy," remarked Ned. "It must be something awful to have a thing like that in your system."

But Nat was not altogether joking. In fact he had more reason than was apparent for wishing Tavia was with the little party. Tavia had written one or two letters to Nat — just friendly notes of course — but the tone of them caused the youth to think that Tavia Travers when with Dorothy Dale was one girl, and Tavia Travers with others — the Buffalo people for example — might be quite a different person.

"She's like an hour glass," thought Nat, as he stood on the side porch and tried to laugh at himself for being "spoony." Then he went on: "She's full of 'sand' all right, but too easily influenced. Now with Dorothy —"

But at that Nat turned suddenly and went to join the others in the library. It was nonsense for him to worry about a girl — probably she would not thank him for his trouble, could she know that he had the audacity to question her conduct.

But, in spite of this, thoughts of Tavia persisted

in thrusting themselves upon him. After all, sincerity of purpose is a power that, once aroused, is not easily cast aside. It is, without question, one of the greatest factors for good in all this big and complicated system of endeavor — in reality the tie that binds.

So that Nat had taken Tavia's affairs "to heart" as he admitted to himself, when thinking the entire matter over very late that night, and, from that time on, whether he willed or not, it seemed to him that these affairs of Tavia's had a queer way of "following him up," although he little realized that this was the price he would be called upon to pay for his sincerity of purpose — the live factor that exists in spite of all obstacles of indifference.

CHAPTER XII

DOROTHY IS WORRIED

DOROTHY had been at the Cedars one short, delightful week when again the question of Tavia and her plans came up for serious consideration. Mrs. White and her niece sat out on the veranda, with the early summer flowers perfuming the soft zephyrs that came through the vine-covered lattice, and they were talking of the absent one — wondering why she did not come to Birchland and instead went to the city in the summer — to Buffalo when everybody in the place (except the tourists on the way to Niagara to the Falls), were leaving for more quiet and recreative surroundings.

"I'm afraid," said Mrs. White finally, "that Tavia is 'stage-struck.'"

These words came to Dorothy like a blow — something long dreaded but materialized at last — in spite of hopes and promises.

"Oh, Aunt Winnie!" exclaimed Dorothy with a sigh, "you don't really think Tavia would do anything wrong?"

"No, that I do not, my dear," promptly answered Mrs. White. "A thing is not wrong unless we intend to make it so. But Tavia has a queer idea of right and wrong. You know she has had no home discipline — no training in character building. She has grown to be as good as she is through the commonest law of nature — she was born good. But she has not gone beyond that same law in growing better than she started out to be — that is moral development, and requires careful culture and prudent discipline."

"But the stage," whispered Dorothy, as if afraid the very word would breathe contamination. "Do you think — Tavia would — would ever try to — to go on a public stage?"

"On that point I could not now express an opinion," answered the aunt kindly, noticing how seriously Dorothy had taken her words. "Of course if she happened to get in with persons interested in that line of work — she might be tempted to try it."

"But what could she do? There are no plays now — it is summer time!"

"The very time, my dear, when small companies try to get a hearing. There are no good plays to attract persons, and the stay-at-homes need some amusement."

This had not occurred to Dorothy before. Her dread of Tavia going on the stage had been kept within bounds by the thought that there were no plays given in any of the theatres, for Dorothy knew little about such things, and had never given a thought to those small companies — the "barnstormers."

"Well," she anounced with a sigh, "I believe I will have to write to her. I can not rest and not know just where she is. Somehow I feel as if my own sister had deserted me — as if she were out among strangers. Oh, Aunt Winnie, you can not realize how much Tavia has always been to me!" and Dorothy dropped her head in her hands to hide the expression of sincere grief that marked her face.

"Well, child, there is absolutely no need to worry. No doubt Tavia is snugly home at this moment, with her own, little, old-fashioned mother — or even out in Buffalo enjoying the visit to her mother's friends. To sit down and imagine all sorts of horrible things — why, Dorothy, it is very unlike you!"

"Perhaps I am silly," Dorothy agreed, smiling brightly as she looked up, "but you know Tavia has been so odd lately. And then she was sick, you know."

Dorothy looked off across the lawn, but she seemed to see nothing. Perhaps she had a day-vision of her friend far away, but whatever Dorothy imagined was far from what Tavia was actually engaged in at that moment.

"Well, come, my dear," said her aunt at length. "The boys are waiting with the auto. See what a spin through the country will do for tired nerves. I tell you this winding up of school is always trying — more so than you can imagine. You are, after all, pretty well tired out, in spite of your pretty pink cheeks," and she tilted Dorothy's chin up to reach her own lips, just as Nat swung himself up on the porch and demanded the immediate presence of his aunt, and cousin, in the Fire Bird that panted at the door.

But, somehow, the afternoon was all lost on Dorothy. Those words "stage-struck" echoed in her ears and she longed to get back to her room and write to Tavia and then to receive the answer that she might show it to Aunt Winnie, to prove that Tavia was as reliable as ever — that she would soon be with them all at North Birchland.

When, after a spin, that on any other occasion would have been delightful, Ned alighted at the little village post-office, Dorothy asked him to bring her out two special delivery stamps. Her

cousin inquired what the rush of mail was for, but she only smiled and tried to hide the fact that she really had occasion to provide for sending a letter in a hurry, and receiving its reply as fast as Uncle Sam could bring it.

They started off again, and a long, exhilarating spin brought them out upon the direct road to the Cedars. Then, after helping their mother and Dorothy out, the boys "shooed" the Fire Bird back to its "nest," and made a dash to witness the last inning of a ball game that had been in progress all the afternoon on the grounds, just across the broad meadow, that stretched in front of their home.

This left Dorothy to herself, for the major had finally listened to Roger's earnest appeal to take him to the ball game. Joe went with the boys who carried the bats — as the latter was always sure to be on time. Then, as Mrs. White would be busy for some time, giving orders for dinner, Dorothy hurried to her room, and sat down, to think it all out, before she undertook to put into written words what she wanted to say to Tavia.

As Dorothy had said to her aunt the loss of Tavia's companionship was like missing that of a dear sister, for the two girls had been inseparable since early childhood. They had always been to-

gether, or they knew they would be apart but for a few days at most.

But now it was different. Heretofore each time that Dorothy thought she would have to be obliged to leave Tavia, either to attend school, or take some new step in life, it so happened that Tavia went along, so that the chain of companionship that began at Dalton had not yet been broken.

And, of course, Dorothy's worries might all be unfounded. As Mrs. White had said, Tavia might be safe at home with her mother.

So it was to Dalton that Dorothy addressed her letter. She needed to be particular in wording it, so that no misunderstanding would arise, should the letter fall into other hands than Tavia's. Dorothy enclosed a special delivery stamp for a hurried answer, which she begged Tavia to send, and she put another of the stamps on the envelope of her own missive.

"There," she said with a sigh of relief as she slipped the little cream-colored square into her blouse. "I shall just have time to run to the office with it before dinner. Somehow I feel better already. It almost seems as if I had been talking to Tavia. I will surely have an answer by to-morrow night. I do wonder — Oh, I won-

der where Tavia is — and what she is doing just now!"

It was a pleasant walk to the country post-office, and Dorothy hurried along in a happier frame of mind than she had enjoyed during all that day. The small worry that had been smouldering in her heart for some weeks (ever since the night of Tavia's queer actions in her sleep when she painted her face with the red crayon) did not need much encouragement to burst forth into a live flame.

And that was precisely what happened when Nat also expressed the opinion that Tavia should have come to North Birchland and that Buffalo was "a big place for such a small girl." Then, that Dorothy's aunt should state plainly her fear regarding Tavia's love for the stage,— surely all this was enough to throw Dorothy into a very fever of anxiety.

That Dorothy knew of Tavia's strange actions on that one occasion, and that she alone, was aware of this, added to the anxiety. The book "How to Act" had betrayed Tavia's secret in clearer terms than even Dorothy would admit to herself. But if Tavia should run away! And if Dorothy had not warned the Travers folks in time!

That evening, after mailing her letter, Dorothy made an excuse to leave the rest of the family and so remained in her own room. She wanted to be alone — to think. In fact, she had been so accustomed to those little solitary thinking spells in Glenwood that the time at the Cedars seemed to be a trifle too exacting. The boys wanted to be with their sister, and Mrs. White had so much to talk over (it was so delightful to have a "big daughter" to converse with), then the major needed Dorothy's counsel in many small, but important matters, so that, altogether, the girl from Glenwood found herself busy — just a little too busy, considering the problem she was trying to solve, which was how to get immediately into communication with Tavia.

That night she dreamed of it all, and for three days following the mailing of her letter she could scarcely think of anything other then why the expected answer did not arrive.

Finally, Dorothy felt that she must take some one into her confidence. All the nervous energy of her young nature had, for days, been so set upon that one point — to hear from Tavia — that the whole circumstance had assumed great importance. She could think of nothing else. Every hour added to her anxiety. She imagined

all sorts of dreadful things. Yes, she must tell somebody of it and thus relieve her mind or she felt she would be ill. This seemed to her the greatest trouble she had ever encountered.

It was a delightful summer evening when Dorothy, dressed in her sea-foam mulle gown, with its dainty silver white trimmings stepped out on the porch, and had the good fortune to find Nat there alone. It was to her young cousin that she had made up her mind to confide her worries, and here he was, as if he was just waiting to help her in this matter of her own heart and Tavia's.

"Great Scott! But you startled me!" exclaimed Nat, jumping up from the hammock. "I do believe, Doro, that I had clean forgotten that you were with us — no offense — but you see I was sort of dreaming and when you glided through that window — well — I say, Doro, I thought my dream had come true!"

"Nat, could you come for a little walk?" asked Dorothy. "You should not dream so early, and besides, you should not, at any time, dream of young girls. You admitted as much, you know. But Nat, I just want a quiet talk — come out along the road as far as the bridge. I want to make sure we are entirely alone."

"Now you don't expect me to move the bridge,

do you, Doro? We may be all alone with the exception of the old stone walls and the planks."

Tucking Dorothy's arm under his own, Nat led the way down the path, then out upon the open road, which was now streaked with faint beams of moonlight, that filtered down through the trees. Nat seemed to feel that Dorothy wanted to talk of Tavia, for he had not been slow to notice the growing look of anxiety that had come upon his cousin's face in the last few days.

"Heard from Tavia?" he asked in a matter-of-fact way, thinking to help Dorothy on with her story.

"No, Nat," she answered, "and that is just what I want to talk about. I am almost worried to death about her. Whatever do you think it means?"

"Think what what means? That Tavia has not answered a letter? Why that doesn't mean anything — at least it didn't last winter, when she would write me for something she wanted me to get for her, and forget to write again saying she had received it. I suppose all girls think they should take their time writing to a fellow, but Tavia was about the limit. So you have no reason to fret, as she will probably write to you the day she packs her trunk to come to the Cedars.

Then she won't have time to mail the letter, so, when she gets here, and steams off the uncancelled stamp, she will calmly hand over the note. Now that's Tavia and her way of being prompt."

"But this is different," said Dorothy. "I did not know Tavia wrote to you last winter."

"Now don't go to romancing. I believe I did get two letters from Miss Travers in answer to five I had written to her. It was about that little colored boy you heard me joking about — some imp Tavia had taken a fancy to, and she wanted to get him a small express wagon. So she wrote to me, being aware of my unusual ability in the line of selecting suitable express wagons for little colored boys."

"But listen, Nat," exclaimed Dorothy, eagerly, "I wrote to Dalton a week ago to-day, sent a special delivery stamp for a quick reply, and I haven't heard a word since."

"Oh, that's it. You sent a special stamp. That was where you made a big mistake. Miss Tavia wanted to write to that girl in Buffalo — had been putting it off as usual — and when she saw your blue stamp it brought her the inspiration. She wrote to 'Dolly,' if Dolly is her name, used your stamp, and 'Dolly' answered 'come.'

Tavia went. There you are. Now what do you think of me as a wireless sleuth?"

"Do you really think Tavia is in Buffalo?" asked Dorothy, endeavoring to bring her cousin down to a common-sense viewpoint.

"Sure of it. But, say, Doro. I'll tell you what! I'll just take a fly in the Fire Bird to-morrow morning, and find out for you for sure. That will be better than the special delivery boy on his bicycle that never moves. I'll be back by lunch time."

"Oh, that will be splendid!" cried Dorothy, giving her cousin's arm a tight squeeze. "You see I could not trust another letter, and I'm so anxious to know. Oh, Nat, you are the very best cousin —"

"Not so bad," interrupted Nat, "when it comes to special messengers. But, little cousin, you can depend on me. I won't let any one hold up the automobile mail coach."

CHAPTER XIII

LITTLE URANIA

THE soft moonlight was now peeping through the screen of maple leaves that arched the old stone bridge, as the shifting shadows of early evening settled down to quiet nightfall. Dorothy and her cousin did not at once turn their steps toward the Cedars; instead they sat there on the bridge, enjoying the tranquil summer eve, and talking of what might happen when all their schooldays would be over and the long "vacation" of the grown-up world would be theirs to plan for, and theirs to shape into the rolling ball of destiny.

Nat declared he would be a physician, as that particular profession had ever been to him the greatest and noblest — to relieve human suffering. Dorothy talked of staying home with her brothers and father. They would need her, she said, and it would not be fair to let Aunt Winnie do so much for them.

"But I say, Dorothy," broke in Nat. "This moonlight is all right, isn't it?"

Dorothy laughed at his attempt at sentimentality. "It is delightful," she replied, "if that is what you mean."

"Yes, that's it — delightful. For real, home-made sentiment apply to Nat White. By the pound or barrel. Accept no substitute. Good thing I did not decide to be a writer, eh? The elements represent to me so many kinds of chemical bodies, put where they belong and each one expected to do its little part in keeping things going. Now, I know fellows who write about the moon's face and the sun's effulgence, just as if the poor old sun or moon had anything to do with the lighting-up process. I never speculate on things beyond my reach. That sort of thing is too hazy for mine."

"Now, Nat, you know very well you are just as sentimental as any one else. Didn't you write some verses — once?"

"Verses? Oh, yes. But I didn't get mixed with the stars. You will remember it was Ned who said:

"'The stars were shining clear and bright
When it rained like time, that fearful night!'

I was the only one who stood by Ned when he penned that stanza. It could rain like time and

be a fearful night while the stars were shining — in China. Oh, yes, that was a great composition, but I didn't happen to win out."

The school test of versification, to which both had reference, brought back pleasant memories, and Dorothy and Nat enjoyed the retrospection.

"What is that?" asked Dorothy suddenly, as something stirred at the side of the bridge on the slope that led to the water.

"Muskrat or a snake," suggested Nat indifferently.

"No, listen! That sounded like someone falling down the path."

"A nice soft fall to them then," remarked Nat, without showing signs of intending to make an investigation.

"Ask if anyone is there," timidly suggested Dorothy.

At this Nat jumped up and looked over the culvert.

"There sure is some one sliding down," he said. "Hi there! Want any help?"

"A stone slipped under my foot," came back the answer, and the voice was unmistakably that of a young girl or a child.

"Wait a minute," called Nat. "I'll get down there and give you a hand."

The path to the brook led directly around the bridge, and it took but a moment for the boy to make his way to the spot whence the voice came. Dorothy could scarcely distinguish the two figures that kept so close to the bridge as to be in danger of sliding under the stone arch.

"There," called Nat. "Get hold of my hand. I have a good grip on a strong limb, and can pull you up."

But it required a sturdy arm to hold on to the tree branch and pull the girl up. Several times Nat lost his footing and slid some distance, but the street level was finally gained, and the strange girl brought to the road in safety.

The moonlight fell across her slim figure, and revealed the outlines of a very queer little creature indeed. She was dark, with all the characteristics of the Gypsy marked in her face.

Dorothy and Nat surveyed her critically. Whatever could a child of her age be doing all alone there, in that deserted place after nightfall?

"Thanks," said the girl to Nat, as she rubbed her bare feet on the damp grass. "I almost fell."

"Almost?" repeated Nat, "I thought you did fall — you must have hit that big rock there. I know it for I used to fish from the same place, and

it's not exactly a divan covered with sofa cushions."

"Yes, I did hit my side on it," admitted the girl, "but it doesn't hurt much."

"What is your name?" asked Dorothy, stepping closer to the stranger.

"Urania. But I'm going to change it. I don't believe in Urania any more."

"Then you are a Gypsy girl," spoke Nat. "I thought I'd seen you before."

"Yes, they say I'm a Gypsy girl, but I'm tired of the business and I'm going away."

"Where?" asked Dorothy.

"Any place as long as it's not back to camp. I left it to-night and I'm never going back to it again — never! never!" and the girl shook her disheveled head in very positive emphasis.

"Why?" asked Dorothy. "You're too young to be out alone and at night. You must be frightened; aren't you?"

"Frightened?" and the girl laughed derisively. "What is there to be afraid of? I know all the snakes and toads, besides the birds."

"Aren't there tramps?" inquired Nat.

"Perhaps. But it would take a slick tramp to catch me. Gypsy girls know how to run, if they can't read and write."

It seemed to Dorothy that this remark was tinged with bitterness; as if the girl evidently felt the loss of education.

"But you had better run back to the camp like a good girl," pleaded Nat. "Come, we'll walk part of the way with you."

"Back to the camp! You don't know what you're talking about. I've started out in the world for myself, and could not go back now if I wanted to. That woman would beat me."

"What woman?" Nat asked.

"The one my father married. They call her Melea. She has her own little girl and doesn't care for Urania."

"But where will you stay to-night?" inquired Dorothy, now anxious that the little Gypsy would change her mind, and run back to the camp at the foot of the hill before it would be too late — before she might be missed from her usual place.

"I was going to sleep under the bridge," replied Urania calmly, "but when I heard you talking I came out. I love to hear pretty words."

"Poor child," thought Dorothy, "like a little human fawn. And she wants to start out in the world for herself!"

"I heard what you said about going to Dalton," Urania said to Nat, as she tried to hide her em-

barrassment by fingering her tattered dress, "and I was wondering if you could let me ride in the back of your automobile. I want to go to the big city and it's — it's a far walk — isn't it?"

"It would be a long walk to Dalton," replied Nat in surprise, "but Dalton isn't a big city. Besides, I could never help you to run away," he finished.

"Some boys do," Urania remarked with a pout. "I know people who run away. They come to Melca to have their fortunes told."

Nat and Dorothy laughed at this. It seemed queer that persons who would run away would stop long enough to have their fortunes told by a Gypsy.

"And couldn't I ride in the back of your automobile?" persisted the girl, not willing to let so good a chance slip past her too easily.

"I'm afraid not," declared Nat. "I wouldn't help you to run away in the first place, and, in the second, I never take any girls out riding, except my cousin and her friend."

"Oh, you don't eh?" sneered Urania. "What about the one with the red hair? Didn't I see you out with her one day when we were camping in the mountains — near that high-toned school, Glendale or Glenwood or something like that. And didn't she come to our camp next day to have

her fortune told? Oh, she wanted to start out in the world for herself. You would help her, of course, but poor Urania — she must die," and the girl threw herself down upon the grass and buried her head in the long wet spears.

Dorothy and Nat were too surprised to answer. Surely the girl must refer to Tavia, but Tavia had never ridden out alone with Nat, not even while he was at the automobile assembly near Glenwood. And Tavia could scarcely have gone to the fortune teller's camp.

"I say I have never taken out any girl without my mother or my cousin being along," Nat said, sharply, recovering himself.

"Then it was your girl with another fellow," declared the wily Gypsy, not willing to be caught in an untruth. She arose from the grass and, seeing the telling expression on the faces of her listeners, like all of her cult, she knew she had hit upon a fact of some kind.

"My girl?" repeated Nat laughingly.

"Yes," was the quick answer. "She had bright, pretty colored hair, brown eyes and her initials are O. T. I heard her tell Melea so."

The initials, O. T., must surely be those of Octavia Travers thought Dorothy and Nat. But Nat knew better than to press the subject further.

This cunning girl, in spite of her youth, he was sure, would make answers to suit the questions, and such freedom on the subject of Tavia (especially, now, when there were enough rumors to investigate), would simply be inviting trouble.

But Dorothy was not so wise in her eagerness to hear more. She wanted to know if her chum had really gone to the Gypsy camp from Glenwood, but she would not deign to ask if Tavia really went auto riding with some boys who attended the meet. That would be too mean even to think about! And besides, thought Dorothy suddenly, Tavia was sick during all the time of the automobile assembly.

"I can tell you more if you'll give me money," boldly spoke Urania. "I know all her fortune. I heard Melea tell her. I was outside the tent and I heard every word."

"I thought that was against the practice of the Gypsies," said Nat severely.

"Practice!" sneered the girl. "When a pretty girl comes to our camp I always listen. I like to find out what that kind think about! To see if they are different from Urania!"

"Come," said Dorothy to Nat. "We must go. It is getting late."

"And you don't want to hear about the girl

that is going to run away to a circus?" called the Gypsy as Dorothy and Nat turned away.

"No, thank you, not to-night," replied Nat. "You'd better run home before the constable comes along. They put girls in jail for running away from home."

"Oh, do they? Then your red-headed friend must be there now," called back the Gypsy with unconcealed malice.

"What can she mean?" asked Dorothy, clinging to her cousin's arm as they hurried along.

"Oh, don't mind that imp. She is just like all her kind, trying to play on your sympathies first and then using threats. She was listening to us talking and picked up all she told us. She got the initials at Glenwood — likely followed Tavia and asked some other girl what her name was. I remember now, there was a Gypsy settlement there. That part's true enough."

"Perhaps," admitted Dorothy with a sigh. "I know Mrs. Pangborn positively forbade all the girls to go near the Gypsy camps, but some of the pupils might have met Urania on the road."

"That's about it," decided Nat. "But she ought to stick to the game. She'd make a good player. The idea of waylaying us and pretending to have fallen down."

"It's hard to understand that class," admitted Dorothy. "But I hope she'll not stay out all night. I should be worried if I awoke, and heard her walking about under the trees near my window."

"No danger," declared Nat. "I must go and see that the garage is locked. She might take a notion to turn the Fire Bird into a Pullman sleeper."

Then, leaving Dorothy on the veranda with his mother, Nat went around to the little auto shed, fastened the door securely and put the key into his pocket.

CHAPTER XIV

THE RUNAWAY

Dorothy was not sure whether she dreamed it, or really heard sounds stirring under the trees. She had been thinking of the Gypsy girl, and Tavia, as she fell asleep, and when she suddenly awoke in the middle of the night, there seemed to be some one moving about just under the window of her room. It was so quiet that even faint sounds could be heard, and Dorothy lay there listening for some time, after being aroused. Presently something banged — like a blind being slammed back. There was no breath of wind — surely someone must have opened the shutter!

The moonlight came in through the casement and illuminated the room enough for her to see to get up and reach her door. It was but a step to the boys' apartment. She would call them, she decided, but was most anxious not to disturb her father or aunt.

Strange to say when Dorothy had slipped on her dressing gown and slippers and knocked at

the door of the boys' room, she found them both awake, for they had answered her light tap at once. A moment later they were in the corridor, attired in their big bath robes.

"I'm sure I heard a footstep at the side porch," whispered Dorothy.

"So did I," answered Ned. "I've been awake for a long time, listening."

"Perhaps you had better go down," suggested Dorothy nervously. "It might be a tramp."

"Tramp nothing," declared Nat boldly, as he made his way softly to the front door. "I'll bet it's our friend Urania. I was sure she would call this evening."

Without the slightest fear the brothers opened the door, and searched about for a possible intruder. They even looked under the lilac bush at Dorothy's window, but no midnight prowlers were discovered.

Dorothy bravely stood at the front door, waiting to call for more help in case the boys should need assistance, but they finally returned from their hunt more disgusted than alarmed. Dorothy was entirely satisfied now that no one was about the place.

"I call that mean," grumbled Nat. "I was all primed for an adventure."

"You should be careful what sort of acquaintances you pick up after dark," cautioned Ned. "Your little Urania may turn out troublesome if you cross her. Gypsies have a way of making people 'pony up' with the money, you know."

"Don't wake the folks," cautioned Dorothy, leading the way back to the sleeping rooms. "I'm not a bit afraid now."

"Well, if she comes back again, ask her in," spoke Nat in a hoarse whisper. "I think Urania needs a talking to."

Dorothy fell asleep again, after listening for some time, and was not disturbed any further that night, until the bright sun shining into her windows, called her to get up to begin another day.

As they had planned, Nat was to start early for Dalton. He could easily make some excuse for his solitary trip — say that he wanted to see some friends who were off camping, or that he wanted to go fishing. He mentioned these two objects vaguely as he started off.

Dorothy warned him not to let an inkling of her fears concerning Tavia reach the ears of any one in Dalton, but there was no need for this, as Nat was as anxious as was his cousin to keep the matter secret between them.

"It's an easy thing to start gossip in a place

like Dalton," he whispered to Dorothy as he threw in the clutch to send the auto on its way, "and you can depend upon me to give them another 'think' if they're looking for news."

As the Fire Bird swung out along the path Nat turned to wave a reassuring good-bye to Dorothy who stood on the porch watching him spin away.

The morning which had begun so bright and pleasant now took on a gloomy aspect for Dorothy. How could she wait for Nat's return? And what would he find out concerning Tavia and her plans? Suppose she should really be in Buffalo? That would not necessarily mean that she had gone away — she might be visiting her friend, Grace Barnum.

It seemed impossible for Dorothy to become interested in anything save Nat and his mission. She tried to sew, but soon laid aside the dainty little work basket Aunt Winnie had provided for the summer hours on the porch. Then Ned invited her to go bicycling, and she had to make some excuse for refusing the invitation. Even writing some letters for the major did not distract her, and she could think of nothing but Nat and his trip to Dalton.

But, somehow, the morning wore on, and it was almost time for Nat to return, as Dorothy knew

in his swift car he could make the journey in record time over the good roads.

"But I'm sure something will delay him," said Dorothy to herself. "I feel as if something will surely happen!"

And a well-grounded fear it was for, meanwhile, something was happening to Nat — something quite unexpected.

Having reached, in due time, Dalton and the little cottage where the Travers family dwelt, Nat steered the machine up in front of the door. Then he remembered he had to tighten the bolt of the clutch pedal, and decided to do it before making his inquiries, as it was important that the pedal be tight. He turned back to the machine, from which he had jumped, to get his wrench from the tool box under the rear seat. He unbuttoned the leather curtain that reached down to the floor of the tonneau, and was feeling about for the wrench when he started back in surprise.

There, under the seat, stretched out so as to be concealed while the curtain was down, was Urania, the Gypsy girl! The confined space made her hump up like an angry cat, and her dark face peered sharply into Nat's from under the leather flap.

For a moment Nat could not find words to

speak to the girl, who remained in her hiding place, grinning out at him with a mocking look on her elfin face.

"Hello!" she exclaimed presently. "I had a lovely ride."

"Get out of there instantly," exclaimed Nat, in angry tones. "How in the world did you ever get in there?"

"Oh, easy enough. You locked the door, but you left the shed window open last night, and I crawled in. I was almost a goner, though, when you and your brother came out on the porch looking for spooks. I was just trying your hammock then. That's a softer cradle than this stuffy place."

"I guess I'd better hand you over to a constable," went on Nat, realizing what it might mean to try to drag the girl from her hiding place just then.

"Oh, don't trouble yourself," was the cool answer. "I believe I've had enough of riding, and I'd like to stretch out a bit."

By this time the Travers family had become aware of the presence of the Fire Bird at their door, and Mrs. Travers, impressed with the distinction, had stepped back quickly to her room to tidy herself up a bit. This gave Nat a few mo-

ments longer to think of what he had best do with the Gypsy girl.

"Here," he said to her, rather fiercely, "you just stay under that seat until I'm ready to take you to a place of safety. Now, if you dare to move while I'm in this house I'll — I'll have you arrested," and with that Nat fastened down the curtain securely, with a catch that snapped on the outside and was incapable, as he supposed, of being opened from the inside.

He walked up the path to the front door and, after a few seconds, his knock was answered by Mrs. Travers. With unlimited protestations of welcome she showed Nat in, and offered him a seat in the far corner of the room, some distance from the front windows. He felt that he had better keep his eye on the machine, because of his concealed passenger, so, after a moment's hesitation, he took a chair near the front of the apartment, remarking, as he did so, what a pretty view there was from the window.

"What brings you to Dalton?" asked Mrs. Travers.

"I was — er — just passing through, and I thought I'd stop to inquire — about the family. Dorothy would like to know," said Nat.

"Oh, we're about as well as usual," said Tavia's mother.

"How's Tavia? Is she home?" asked Nat quickly, feeling that this was as good an opening as he could desire.

"No, and I'm very sorry, for she'd be delighted to see you. She went to Buffalo just after coming from school. We scarcely had a good look at her. I wanted her to stay home for a week, but she was so set on going that she started off bag and baggage, and I'm sure I can't say when she will be home. Of course she's with friends," the mother hastened to add, seeing the look of surprise that flashed over Ned's face in spite of his effort at self-control.

"My cousin, Dorothy, wrote to her," Nat hastened to say, to cover his confusion, "and, not receiving an answer, thought it likely that she might be ill, or away."

"Tavia's father forwarded the letter to her," said Mrs. Travers. "She should have answered it by this time. We have only had one souvenir card from her since she went away, but it was a real pretty one; I'd like to show it to you, but I guess I've mislaid it. I can't think where I put it."

"Never mind. I suppose it takes some time for a letter to travel when it's been forwarded

from one place to another. I dare say Dorothy will soon hear from her. I'm glad all the family are well. Major Dale is always glad to hear news of the Dalton folks."

"And indeed we all miss the major," spoke Mrs. Travers with a show of feeling. "Not to say we don't miss the entire family, for the boys were fine little fellows, and, as for Dorothy —"

The intended tribute to Dorothy ended with a little catch in Mrs. Travers's voice, for she was very fond of her daughter's companion, and sometimes showed her feelings with a touch of sentimentality.

Then, as Nat was really in a hurry (for he could not stop thinking of Urania under the seat) he made his excuses as quickly and as politely as the circumstances would allow, and was soon out of the house. He lost no time in cranking up and, in a few minutes, was chug-chugging at top speed down the country road.

He had made up his mind to take the Gypsy girl back to North Birchland, and was vaguely wondering, as he dashed along, why she did not knock on the seat and demand to be let out of her uncomfortable quarters.

"I think I'll stop and just take a look at her. She may be crying," the lad remarked to himself,

and, bringing the machine to a halt alongside the road, he stepped out.

He assumed a determined look before unfastening the curtain, for he was bound not to let his sympathies run away with him in dealing with the unruly girl. He shoved back the catch and raised the leather flap.

Urania was gone!

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" cried Nat aloud, so great was his astonishment at the second surprise the Gypsy had given him. "If she isn't a dandy! How in the world did she slip out without me seeing her?"

But Nat had forgotten the few moments when he sat on the sofa at the rear side of Mrs. Travers's parlor, some distance from the front windows, and it was in those few moments that Urania had managed to undo the catch, in spite of its supposed security, and slip out of the Fire Bird. Swiftly, as no girl but a Gypsy can run, she had fled down the street, across the Dalton bridge, and into the deep woods beyond, where she would have time to plan out the remainder of her day's travels.

"Well, she's gone — good riddance," thought Nat, as he started up the machine once more, and turned, at a swift speed, into the turnpike leading to North Birchland.

CHAPTER XV

A SPELL OF THE "GLUMPS"

WHIZZING along the road Nat tried to decide how it would be best to break the disappointing news to Dorothy. Of his escapade with Urania he had fully determined not to say a word. Dorothy had enough girls to worry about, he argued, and if she heard of this one she would form a searching expedition, and set out at once to hunt the Gypsy who, Nat thought, was like a human squirrel and able to take care of herself.

The return trip seemed shorter than that which took Nat out to Dalton, and as the Fire Bird swung into the Cedars' entrance somewhat later than the youth expected to get back, Dorothy was at the gate awaiting to hear news of Tavia.

"Buffalo," announced Nat sententiously, as Dorothy came up beside the car which jerked to a stop amid a screeching of the brake. "She went there some time ago. She's at Grace Barnum's. Wait, I have the address."

Without delaying to put the machine up, Nat

produced a slip of paper upon which he had written, at Mrs. Travers's direction, the street and number of Miss Barnum's residence. He handed it to Dorothy.

"Do you think it's all right?" asked Dorothy, looking at the directions.

"'Course it is. Everybody in Dalton is as chipper as possible. You're the only one who's worrying. Now, if I were you, I'd just let up, Doro. You'll be down sick if you don't."

"Perhaps I am foolish. And I have given you a lot of trouble," spoke up the girl a little sadly.

"Trouble? Nothing!" exclaimed Nat. "I just like the lark. When you want any more sleuthing done apply at headquarters. I'm the gum-shoe man for this section," and at that he turned his attention to the Fire Bird, while Dorothy walked thoughtfully back to the house.

Poor Dorothy! An instinctive foreboding of danger had taken possession of her now, and, try as she did to dispel it, an unmistakable voice seemed to call out to her:

"Find Tavia! She needs you, Dorothy Dale!"

"Perhaps," thought Dorothy, "she has run away and is really with some circus troupe, as the Gypsy girl said. Or perhaps she is at some watering place, taking part in a play —"

This last possibility was the one that Dorothy dreaded most to dwell upon. Tavia must have loved the stage, else why did she constantly do the things she did at school, so like a little actress, and so like a girl "stage-struck," as Aunt Winnie called it?

These and similar fancies floated through Dorothy's brain hour after hour, in spite of whatever diversion presented itself for her amusement.

The afternoon, following Nat's trip to Dalton, Dorothy, with her brothers, Roger and Joe, went to gather pond lilies near the waterfall. It was a delightful day, and the sun glistened on the quiet sheet of the mill pond, making liquid diamonds. The lilies, of which there was an abundance, looked like carved wax that had frozen the sun's gold in each heart. But, somehow, Dorothy, could not work up her usual enthusiasm in gathering the blossoms.

It was delightful to dip her hands into the cool stream and surely to hear little Roger prattle was an inspiration, but all the while Dorothy was thinking of crowded Buffalo, and wondering what a certain girl might be doing there on that summer afternoon.

In the evening Major Dale and Mrs. White, taking Dorothy with them, went for a drive

along the broad boulevard that was the pride of that exclusive summer place — North Birchland. Dorothy tried bravely to rouse herself from her gloomy reveries but, in spite of her efforts, Mrs. White complained that her niece was not like her usual self —" Perhaps not feeling well," she ventured.

" I'm ' glumpy ' ever since I left Glenwood," admitted Dorothy. " Not because I want to be, nor that I am not having a most delightful time, but I simply have the ' glumps.' At Glenwood they prescribe extra work for an attack like this," and the girl laughed at her own diagnosis.

" You certainly should dispel the ' glumps,' " said Mrs. White. " I can't imagine what could produce an attack here at the Cedars, with all your own folks around you, Dorothy, dear. I do believe you are lonely for those impossible girls. What do you say to paying some of them a little visit, just to break in on your holiday? "

"Really, aunty," protested Dorothy, " I am perfectly content. What sort of girl would I be to want to run away and leave you all after being away so long at school? No, indeed, I'll stay right here at the beautiful Cedars, and I'll try to be a better girl — to get rid at once of my spell

of the 'glumps' as we used to call them at Glenwood."

"But girls are girls," insisted her aunt, "and you have no control, my dear, over such sentiment as I imagine you are afflicted with at present. Just plan out a little trip somewhere and, I'll vouch for it, the visit to some giggling Dolly Varden of a girl will do you no end of good. And then, too, you may invite her back here with you."

Mrs. White divined too well the reason for Dorothy's "blue spell." She could see perfectly how much her niece missed the light-hearted Tavia, and in advising her to take a little trip Mrs. White was sure Dorothy would choose to go where her chum might be.

In this she was right, but concerning what Dorothy might do to reach Tavia Mrs. White had no idea. She merely suggested a "little trip somewhere," believing Dorothy would find Tavia, either in Dalton, or visiting some girl friend, as Dorothy had told her Tavia intended doing. But circumstances conspired to give Dorothy the very opportunity she longed for — she would go somewhere — anywhere — to look for her "sister-friend" — the girl who had been to her more than friend and almost a sister.

Ned and Nat had planned a trip to Buffalo at the beginning of their vacation. They were to meet a number of their chums there, and do some exploring in the neighborhood of Niagara Falls. They were to make the journey in the Fire Bird, and when Mrs. White suggested a trip for Dorothy it was the run to Buffalo, in the automobile, that immediately came into the girl's mind.

"If I only could go with the boys," she pondered. "But what excuse would I have?"

All the next day she turned the subject over in her mind. Then something very remarkable happened. Persons who believe in thought controlling matter would not call the incident out of the ordinary perhaps, but, be that as it may, when Dorothy strolled down to the post-office, having a slender hope of a letter from Tavia, she did find a letter in the box — a letter from Rose-Mary Markin, stating that she, and her mother, were going to Buffalo and Niagara Falls for a few days, and, as Buffalo was only about a day's trip from North Birchland, perhaps Dorothy could take a "run" to Buffalo, and spend a few days with them.

Dorothy's head thumped when she read the letter. The very thing of all others she would have wished for, had she been as wise as the un-

known fate that worked it out for her, without any action on her own part!

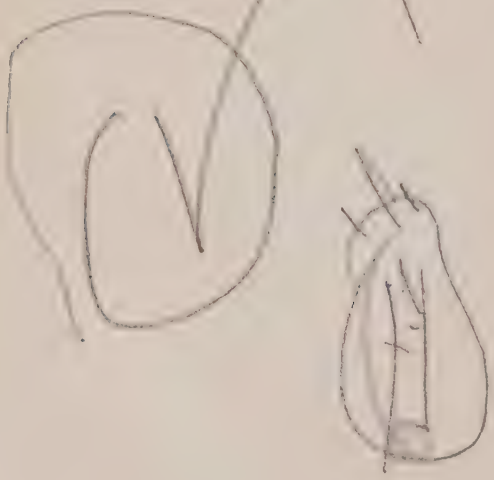
She felt light enough now to "fly" over the road back to the Cedars, to show the invitation to Mrs. White. The boys were to leave for Buffalo the next day, so there was little time to be lost, should Major Dale and Mrs. White think it best for Dorothy to make the trip. How the girl trembled while waiting for the decision. What if she should be disappointed? It was a long ride in the auto — but with her cousins —

Mrs. White read Rose-Mary's little note a second time while Dorothy stood there waiting. The aunt noticed how delicately Rose-Mary indicated her own mother's anxiety to meet Dorothy, and then with what a nicety the whole matter was referred to Major Dale and Dorothy's aunt. This carefully written note, neither stilted nor indifferent in its tone, convinced Mrs. White at once that the writer was exactly the girl Dorothy had described her to be — her very best friend at Glenwood — excepting only Tavia.

"Well, I don't see why you can't go with the boys," spoke her aunt finally. "They are always careful, and if you leave here, as they intend to do, at sunrise (that will be an experience for you) you should get into Buffalo in time for the evening

dinner. I'll just sound the major," giving Dorothy a loving embrace. "Not that a mere man, even be he Major Dale, can hold out against two such Sampson-like wills as ours."

From that moment, until the time of her stepping into the Fire Bird next morning, and waving a good-bye to the little party that stood on the porch to see them off, it all seemed like the strangest, subtlest dream to Dorothy. She was going to find Tavia — going herself to look for her, and find out for herself all the questions that, for weeks, had been eating away her happiness with dreaded uncertainties.



CHAPTER XVI

DOROTHY IN BUFFALO

"AND now," remarked Ned after they had skimmed along for awhile, "I suppose, Dorothy, you can't deny me the long-looked for opportunity of meeting the sweetest girl in Glenwood (according to you) Cologne — Rose-Mary Markin, to be exact."

"Oh, I know you will like her, Ned. She certainly is a very sweet girl," replied Dorothy.

"The very thing for me. I have been looking for that brand for some time. And now, O Edward, prepare thyself!"

"Mind your wheel!" cried Nat, for Ned had raised his right hand in the air to give emphasis to his dramatic utterance and came close to a large stone. "Save that for later."

Dorothy was as bright and animated as possible during the trip and chatted with the boys about the Glenwood girls, giving a full share of praise to Cologne. After all, Dorothy reflected, Ned was a young man, handsome, and, in many ways, desir-

able, and it would be nice if he were to take the two girls around Buffalo. But this thought was overshadowed by another — If Tavia were only with them. What good times they might have! Tavia and Nat always got along so well together. Each seemed to be an inspiration of mirth to the other.

But Tavia!

Nat seemed quiet, and even serious as they speeded along the lonely country roads. His brother was not slow to notice the unusual look of concern and attempted to "jolly" it away.

"Cheer up, Nat," he said. "The worst is yet to come," and he made a wry face. "You know we expect to find your little friend somewhere out this way. I really wouldn't want a corner on happiness. I do feel, somehow, that Cologne will be my fate, but that is no reason why you and Doro shouldn't hitch on to the band wagon. Let me see, Doro, you say she has brown eyes and blue hair — "

"Ned! You must not make fun of Cologne — "

"Fun of her! As soon bite my own tongue. I said it sideways by mistake It should have read blue eyes and brown hair. Wasn't that it?"

"Yes, that's more like it," admitted Dorothy.

"And she has the most adorable little mouth —"

"Oh, here, Nat! Get hold of this wheel. I really must have a chance to think that over. Say it again, Dorothy, please," and the lad went through a series of queer antics, that seem so very funny when the right boy attempts to be funny, but so very flat when one tries to either describe them or imitate the original.

"And isn't there a brother in this visit to Buffalo?" asked Nat drolly.

In spite of herself the color flew to Dorothy's cheeks. Of course Rose-Mary had a brother, two years older than herself. But Dorothy had never met him, although Rose-Mary talked so much at school of Jack, that Dorothy almost felt acquainted with the youth. But now she would certainly meet the family for they were all together at the Buffalo hotel.

"Oh, yes," chimed in Ned. "Isn't there a brother?"

"Yes," answered Dorothy. "I believe there is."

"Now I call that real jolly," went on Ned. "Just one apiece — if Nat finds Tavia, of course."

A few hours later the Fire Bird swung up to the portico of a leading Buffalo hotel, and, scarcely had the puffing machine come to a stop than a girl

in lavender, with blue eyes and brown hair, had Dorothy in her arms.

"Oh, you dear, old sweetheart!" exclaimed Rose-Mary, as she embraced Dorothy with that effusion of delight peculiar to schoolgirls and babies, as Nat remarked in a whisper to Ned.

"And you were so good to think of me," Dorothy tried to say, from the midst of the embrace.

"Think of you! As if I ever forgot you for one single moment!" Then Rose-Mary turned to the two boys in the auto and paused.

"These are my cousins," began Dorothy. "This is Mr. Edward White and the other one," — with a little laugh, — "is his brother Nathaniel."

The boys bowed and made what were probably intended for complimentary acknowledgments of the introduction, but which were mere murmurs. Rose-Mary, however with the usual advantage of girls over boys in such matters, showed no embarrassment.

"There is one real nice thing about Dorothy," spoke Nat when he had, in a measure recovered his composure. "She always makes Ned my brother. That counts."

The girls laughed merrily and then a tall young man, the "very image of Rose-Mary only taller,"

according to Dorothy, stepped down to the curb.

"Jack!" called Rose-Mary. "Come here instanter and get acquainted with Dorothy."

Jack looked at the group. His eyes plainly said "only with Dorothy?"

"Oh, help yourself! Help yourself!" cried Ned, laughing at the confusion Cologne's speech had caused. "We will be 'among those present' if you like."

"Now you know very well what I mean!" and Rose-Mary shot a challenging look at Ned. "I want you all to be the very best of friends —"

"Thanks, thanks!" exclaimed Nat, as he and his brother bowed in mock deference. "We promise, I assure. We'll do our best."

"Oh, boys are all just alike," stammered Dorothy's host. "A pack of teases! Come along Dorothy. Mother is waiting to welcome you. Jack, perhaps you will tell Dorothy's cousins what to do with their machine. I guess you know how to get acquainted with them without any more introductions."

This last was said with a defiant look at Ned, who returned it with just the suspicion of a smile. In effect his look said:

"Miss Lavender, you have met a boy who may be like other boys, but he is particularly himself

— Ned White — and he just loves to tease girls — like you!"

Rose-Mary was leading Dorothy up the broad steps to the hotel entrance. She turned to see what the boys were doing.

"Well I declare!" she exclaimed. "There they've all gone for a ride! I'm sure they'll have a jolly time. What nice boys your cousins are. Oh, I'm so glad you could come!"

The hotel veranda was thronged with persons enjoying the approach of twilight, for the auto party had not made a hurried trip, having stopped for lunch on the way. It seemed to Dorothy that the chairs were mostly filled with stout ladies with blond hair. She had never before seen so many blonds in one group.

Rose-Mary led the way into the parlor and escorted Dorothy up to a smiling, pretty woman, with such beautiful white hair — the kind that goes with brown eyes and seems to add to their sparkle.

"Mother, dear, this is Dorothy," said Rose-Mary. "She must be tired after her long, dusty ride. Shall we go upstairs?"

"I'm so glad to meet you, my dear," declared Mrs. Markin, warmly. "Daughter talks so much about you. Yes, Rosie, do take Dorothy

upstairs and let her refresh herself. It must be a very long ride from North Birchland."

"But I'm not the least tired," protested the visitor. "So don't go upstairs, if you were enjoying the air."

"Air indeed!" echoed Rose-Mary, slipping her arm through Dorothy's. "Mother, will you come?"

"No, dear," replied Mrs. Markin. "I'll let you have Dorothy all to yourself for awhile. I just know how many things you will want to talk about. Later, after dinner, I'll claim you both. But I'm going to improve this time to write a few belated letters. The desk is clear so I can do them down here."

Rose-Mary left Dorothy while she made a place for her mother at the little private desk in the ladies' sitting room, then the two girls took the elevator, in the broad hall, and soon Dorothy found herself in a cozy room, with a dainty white bed, and pretty flouncings — Rose-Mary's apartment of course, which she had surrendered to her guest for the visit, while Cologne would share her mother's room.

"Now make yourself comfortable," began Rose-Mary, assisting Dorothy to lay aside her auto wraps. "Perhaps you want to wash. Here

are the things," and she pulled open a little door, disclosing a bathroom.

"Isn't it charming here," Dorothy said as she at once began to make herself presentable for dinner. "I have a blue dress in my bag," indicating one the porter had brought up.

"Drag it out," commanded her companion. "You must wear blue. I have told Jack how heavenly you look in blue."

"And I have whispered to Ned how angelic you look in — lavender," interrupted Dorothy, not to be outdone in bestowing compliments. "Isn't Ned a lovely — boy!"

"Very saucy, I should say," and Cologne laughed mischievously. "But I'll try to be nice to him on your account."

"And I hope I'll not say anything to hurt Jack's feelings," spoke Dorothy, still keeping in with her friend's humor.

"Couldn't! He hasn't any," declared Rose-Mary. "He drives me frantic when I really want to make him mad."

"But you do look lovely in that lavender gown," insisted Dorothy, with unmistakable admiration. "I believe you have grown prettier —"

"Comparative degrees, eh?" and she made a

queer little face. "Now, Doro dear, you must say I've grown positively handsome. I will never be content with the little, insignificant comparative degree in a suite of rooms like these. Aren't they really scrumptious? You know dad couldn't come, and he was so anxious that we would be comfortable, that the dear old darling just wired for good rooms, and that's how we got these. They're good, aren't they?"

Dorothy looked out of the broad window, down at the big city stretched before her view. She could not help thinking of Tavia, although she thought it best not to speak of her to Rose-Mary — just yet at least. Cologne was busy hanging up the things she had pulled out of Dorothy's bag.

"How long can you stay?" she asked, shaking out Dorothy's light blue linen frock.

"Well, it was the queerest thing! Aunt Winnie got it into her head that I needed some of the girls, and she proposed a little trip for me, just as your letter came. It seemed providential."

"Providential? That's what I call dead lucky, girlie. You can't expect a real proper providence to get mixed up in all our little scrapes. And, to be honest, I'm just dying for a real genuine scrape. The kind Tavia used to 'hand out' to us at Glenwood."

Dorothy smiled but did not reply. Somehow the idea of Tavia still being kept busy "handing out scrapes" struck her as somewhat significant.

Presently the boys returned, which fact was made known by a shrill whistle over the private telephone in the apartment, and Jack's voice following with a command for "Rosie" to come down.

The girls found the three boys and Mrs. Markin waiting for them, Ned and Nat having declined Jack's invitation to take dinner with him at the hotel. They said they had to be off to meet the youths with whom they had arranged to stop while in Buffalo.

Dorothy wanted so much to ask Nat to take her to look for Tavia. She felt she would not sleep until she found the house of Tavia's friend, Grace Barnum, but she was too uncertain of Tavia's whereabouts to say openly that she wanted to go to the address that Nat had brought her from Mrs. Travers.

The Fire Bird had been left in quarters provided by the boys of the "Get There" club, members of which were to be Ned's and Nat's guests, and the two Birchland youths were thus free to walk about the big city that evening. Perhaps

Dorothy might also go for a walk, with Rose-Mary and Jack.

But, Dorothy, as she reflected on this possibility, realized that it would not afford her an opportunity of getting to Grace Barnum's. It would not do for the entire party to go there, Dorothy felt, as she could never allow any one to suspect her anxiety concerning Tavia. Only Nat was in the secret so far, and even he was not made fully aware of all it involved and of its depth — he did not know why Dorothy was so anxious — or that she had any other than a foolish schoolgirl whim urging her on.

So, in spite of all the surroundings and excitement, incident to life in a big hotel with its many strange phases, Dorothy kept turning the question over and over in her mind. How should she go about her search for Tavia? Just as she expected the party planned to go out that first evening of her visit to "look over the town." All were going except Mrs. Markin, and she consented to let the young folks enjoy themselves without her chaperonage, on account of the circumstances and the number who were going.

Ned and Nat both essayed to look after Rose-Mary, and this added to the merry-making, since,

when one lad would attempt some courtesy the other would immediately undertake to outdo him. Dorothy found Jack Markin splendid company, and this, she told herself, could not be otherwise, since he was brother to Cologne.

At a pretty palm-festooned ice-cream parlor they met a friend of the Markin family, Alma Mason, who was also a visitor in Buffalo. She was bright and interesting, chatting pleasantly on many subjects, until, to Dorothy's surprise, she asked abruptly:

"Do you happen to know a Grace Barnum?"

"No," Dorothy answered, as she felt her face burning with excitement. "I do not know her personally, but she is a friend of a chum of mine."

"The pretty girl, with the golden-brown hair? Oh, I have met her," Alma went on, taking Dorothy's look to signify the correctness of the guess that the "pretty girl with the brown hair" was Dorothy's friend. "Isn't she splendid? Grace was just wild over her — she was so jolly and funny."

That Miss Mason used the past tense Dorothy instantly noticed. Nat was also listening with interest, and he observed the same thing.

"Is she not with Miss Barnum now?" Dorothy found courage to inquire finally.

"No, I think not. I think Grace said she had gone to Rochester. She has, I believe, a friend in that city."

Dorothy was startled at the news that Tavia had left Buffalo. Her heart sank, but she tried to conceal her feelings. Tavia in Rochester! The girl in Rochester was she who had once written Tavia concerning the stage and its attractions. And Tavia possibly was with her, after she had promised to have no further correspondence with that press agent!

The remainder of the evening was like a blank page to Dorothy. She heard and saw what was going on around her, but her heart and her attention was not with the merry little party from the hotel. Jack Markin would have accused her of being dull had he not determined to meet more than half way his sister's estimate of Dorothy Dale. Then too, he reasoned as an excuse for her obvious low spirits, she must be tired after the long, dusty auto run.

The evening passed quickly (to all but Dorothy) amid a variety of entertainments, and when the boys from North Birchland said good-night in the hotel office and Rose-Mary had taken Dorothy to her room, it was quite late.

It was a relief, however, Dorothy had to admit

to herself at least, and in her heart she was grateful to Mrs. Markin when that lady cautioned the two girls against further talking, and urged Dorothy to go to bed. For Dorothy wanted to be alone and think. She wanted to plan. How should she proceed now? If Tavia was not with Grace Barnum —

But of this she must first make certain, and to do so she would ask Nat to take her to Miss Barnum's house the first thing next morning.

CHAPTER XVII

AT THE PLAY

But little light was thrown on the disappearance of Tavia through any information Dorothy could obtain from Grace Barnum. In fact that young lady was quite as puzzled as was Dorothy, and when told that Tavia was not to be found at home a few days previous (this being within the time when Tavia had left Buffalo ostensibly for her residence in Dalton) Miss Barnum wanted to communicate immediately with the missing girl's parents.

Nat, with kind consideration, had declined to step inside when Dorothy called at the Barnum home. He thought he might better give the two young ladies a chance to discuss the situation alone, and so, under pretense of strolling through the little park opposite the house, left Grace and Dorothy together.

It took the girls but a moment to arrive at the same point of interest. Grace showed keenest

anxiety when Dorothy inquired for Tavia, for she had fears of her own — since her friend's visit.

"I must write at once," she insisted. "What would Mrs. Travers think of me if anything happened to Tavia?"

"But I have already begun a letter," stated Dorothy, truthfully enough, "so perhaps I had better make the inquiry. You know how excitable Mrs. Travers is. Perhaps I could write without causing her any alarm, whereas she would surely expect you to know whether or not Tavia was home. I haven't the slightest doubt but that she is home — now," Dorothy hastened to add. "I am expecting her at North Birchland any day."

This had the effect of putting Grace at her ease. Of course, she reflected, Tavia might even be at the Cedars now, as her mother had given her permission to go about almost as she wished, and she had expected to pay a number of visits to friends, no special time being set for them. This Grace knew for she had seen a letter to that effect from Mrs. Travers to Tavia.

"You see," said Dorothy, rising to go, "they have always given Tavia so much her own way. She has been — well, sort of superior to the others at home. That, I think, is a real mistake, for a girl is expected to know more of the world and

its ways than is consistent with her actual experience."

"Exactly," admitted Grace. "That is what I thought once when Tavia acted so — well so self-reliant. I do hope she is safe at home. You will let me know, won't you Dorothy? I may call you that, mayn't I? I feel as if I had known you for a long time, as Tavia has talked so much about you."

So the two girls parted, and Dorothy's heart seemed to grow heavier at each new turn in her quest for the missing one.

"Why should Tavia act so?" she asked herself over and over again, as she walked along with Nat who tried to cheer her up.

"If you don't stop worrying, Doro," he counseled as he noted the look of anxiety on her face, "you'll be a sick girl 'way out here in Buffalo."

"I'm going to be excused from the party tonight," she answered. "I really have a headache, and I must have time to write some letters."

"Great headache cure — letter writing. But I suppose you'll not rest until you sift this matter to the very bottom. And, to be honest, Doro, I can't say I blame you. I'd give a whole lot, right now, to know where the wily Tavia tarries."

As discreetly as she could, Dorothy wrote the

letter to Mrs. Travers to ask the mooted question. She did not say she had been to Grace Barnum's, but simply inquired for Tavia's address. On an early mail the next day (a remarkable thing for Mrs. Travers to answer a letter so promptly) came the reply that Tavia was at the Barnums! There was some other news of Dalton in the epistle, but that concerning Tavia, which her mother had apparently set down as a matter of fact, stood out prominently from all the rest.

In spite of her fears, when the letter presented the actual fact that Tavia was not at home, and, as Dorothy knew she was not at Grace's, it came like a shock to the girl already in a highly nervous state because of what she had gone through. Hoping against hope she had clung to the slim possibility that some explanation might come from Dalton, but now even this was shattered.

One thing Dorothy quickly decided upon. She must have another talk with Alma Mason, and she must be careful not to excite suspicion as to the real purpose of the conversation.

Realizing at once that she must now move cautiously in the matter, for the slightest intimation that Tavia was away from home and friends, without either the latter or relatives having a clue to her whereabouts, would be sure to ruin Tavia's

reputation, Dorothy now determined that even Nat should not know of her plans for continuing the search.

How hopeless Dorothy felt all alone in such a work! But find Tavia she must, and to find her very soon she felt was imperative, for, even in Buffalo, with her friends, Dorothy could see the dangers of a large city to an unprotected and unsuspecting young girl.

But the boys were going back to North Birchland the next day! How could Dorothy act in time to get to Rochester? for to Rochester she felt that she now must go. Everything pointed to the fact that Tavia was either there, or that there a clue to her whereabouts could be obtained.

On taking her morning walk alone, for Rose-Mary was a little indisposed, after the party of the evening previous, Dorothy met Miss Mason. It was not difficult to renew the conversation concerning Tavia. Bit by bit Alma told of Tavia's infatuation for the stage, until Dorothy became more than ever convinced that it was in theatrical surroundings that the missing girl would be found.

Mrs. Markin had planned a little theatre party for Rose-Mary and some of her Buffalo friends that afternoon. The play was one especially interesting to young girls — a drama built on lines,

showing how one ambitious girl succeeded in the world with nothing but a kind heart and a worthy purpose to start with. It abounded in scenes of rural home life, wholesome and picturesque, and one of the features, most conspicuous in the advertising on the billboards was that of the character Katherine, the heroine, holding a neighborhood meeting in a cornfield, among the laborers during the noon hour. The girl appeared in the posters perched upon a water barrel and from that pulpit in the open she, as the daughter of a blind chair caner, won hearts to happiness with the gospel of brotherly love — the new religion of the poor and the oppressed.

While Rose-Mary and Alma enthused over the prospect of a particularly pleasant afternoon, Dorothy seemed nervous, and it was with some misgivings that she finally agreed to attend the party that was really arranged for her special entertainment. The boys, Ned, Nat and Jack were going, of course, and to make the affair complete Rose-Mary had also invited Grace Barnum.

Grace was a particularly bright girl, the sort that cares more for books than pretty clothes, and who had the temerity to wear her hair parted directly in the middle in the very wildest of pompadour days. Not that Grace lacked beauty, for she

was of the classic type that seems to defy nationality to such an extent, that it might be a matter of most uncertain guess to say to what country her ancestors had belonged.

This " neutrality " was a source of constant delight to Grace, for each new friend would undertake to assign her to a different country, and so she felt quite like the " real thing in Cosmopolitan types " as she expressed it. The fact, however, might have been accounted for by the incident of Grace having been born under missionary skies in China. Her mother was an American blond, her father a dark foreigner of French and Spanish ancestry and, with all this there was in the Barnum family a distinct strain of Puritan stock, from which the name Barnum came. Grace, being distinctly different from other girls, no doubt attracted Tavia to her, and now, when received among Tavia's friends she was welcomed with marked attention that at once established a bond of friendship between her and the other girls.

The boys, naturally, were not slow to " discover her " so that, altogether, the little matinee party, when it had reached the theatre, was a very merry throng of young people. Mrs. Markin acted as chaperone and, five minutes before the time set for the play to begin Dorothy and her friends sat

staring at the green fire-proof curtain from a roomy box. Dorothy was like one in a dream.

All about her the others were eagerly waiting, looking the while at the programmes, but Dorothy sat there with the pink leaflet lying unheeded in her lap.

"How much that picture of Katherine resembles Tavia," was the thought that disturbed her. "The same hair — the same eyes — what if it should be she?"

The curtain was swaying to and fro as those behind it brushed past in their preparations for the presentation of "Katherine, the Chair Caner's Daughter."

Dorothy's heart beat wildly when she fancied Tavia amid such scenes — Tavia the open-hearted girl, the little Dalton "wild flower" as Dorothy liked to call her. Surely no stage heroine could be more heroic than she had always been in her role of shedding happiness on all who came within her sphere of life.

Suddenly Rose-Mary turned to Nat and remarked:

"How Tavia would enjoy this." She looked around on the gay scene as the theatre was filling up. "What a pity we could not bring her with us for the good time."

Dorothy felt her face flush as Nat made some irrelevant reply. Jack turned directly to Dorothy and, noting her inattention to the programme opened his to point out some of the items of interest.

But still Dorothy stared nervously at the big asbestos curtain and made feeble efforts to answer her companion's questions. Even Mrs. Markin observed Dorothy's rather queer manner, and she, too, showed concern that her daughter's guest should be ill at ease.

"Aren't you well, dear?" she asked quietly.

Dorothy fumbled with a lace flounce on her sleeve.

"Yes," she answered, "but there is so much to see and think about." She felt as if she were apologizing. "I am not accustomed to city theatres," she added.

Then the orchestra broke into the opening number, and presently a flash of light across the curtain told that the players were ready to begin.

The introductory scenes were rather of an amateur order — a poor country home — the blind chair caner at work, and his more or less amusing customers. One flashily-dressed woman wanted him to put a rush bottom in a chair that had belonged to her grandmother, but absolutely refused

to pay even the very low price the caner asked for the work. She wanted it as cheaply as though rush bottoms could be made by machinery. He was poor and needed work but he could not accept her terms.

The woman in a red silk gown, with a bewildering shower of veils floating about her, did not gain any applause for her part in the play. Dorothy noted that even on the stage undesirable persons do not please, and that the assumed character is taken into account as well as their acting.

It was when the blind man sat alone at his door step, with his sightless eyes raised pitifully to the inviting sunset, that the pretty Katherine came skipping into view across the footlights.

Instinctively Nat reached out and, without being observed grasped Dorothy's hand. "How like Tavia!" he mused, while Dorothy actually seemed to stop breathing. From that moment to the very end of the play Nat and Dorothy shared the same thought — it might be Tavia. The others had each remarked the resemblance, but, being more interested in the drama than in the whereabouts of Dorothy's chum (whom they had no occasion to worry about for they did not know the circumstances,) they merely dwelt on it as a pass-

ing thought — they were interested in what happened to the chair caner's daughter.

At last every member of the company found some excuse to get on the stage, and then the end was reached, and the curtain went down while the throng hurried out, seemingly indifferent to the desire of the actors to show themselves again as the curtain shot up for a final display of the last scene.

The Markin party was to go to a restaurant for ice-cream, and so hurried from the box. Dorothy drifted along with them for a few moments, and then again that one thought came to her, overwhelming her.

"What if that should really be Tavia?"

She had but a moment to act, then, when the crowd pressed closer and there was difficulty in walking because of the blockade, Dorothy slipped back, stepped out of her place, and was at once swallowed up in a sea of persons.

CHAPTER XVIII

BEHIND THE SCENES

For a moment Dorothy felt as if she must make her way back after her friends — it was so terrifying to find herself in such a press — but a glance at the wavering canvas that now hid from the public the company of players and helpers, inspired her with new courage. She would go behind the scenes and see if that girl was Tavia!

In a short time the theatre was emptied, save for the ushers and the boys who dashed in and out among the rows of seats, picking up the scattered programmes, and making the place ready for the evening performance. One of the ushers, seeing Dorothy, walked over to her.

"Waiting for anybody?" he asked mechanically, without glancing up at her, but indicating that he was ready to turn up the seat before which she was standing.

"Yes," replied Dorothy.

"In the company?" he inquired next.

"Yes. The young lady who played Katherine."

"This way," the young man exclaimed snappily, but in no unpleasant tone. He led the way along the row of seats, down an isle and through a very narrow door that seemed to be made of black oil cloth.

Dorothy had no time to think of what was going to happen. It had all come about so quickly — she hardly knew how to proceed now — what name to ask for — or whether or not to give her own in case it was demanded. She wondered what the actress would think of her if Katherine did not turn out to be Tavia.

"You mean Miss Riceman," the usher went on as he closed the narrow door. "This way, please," and, the next moment, Dorothy found herself behind the scenes in a big city theatre.

The place was a maze of doors and passageways. Wires and ropes were in a seeming tangle overhead and all about were big wooden frames covered with painted canvas — scenes and flies that slid in and out at the two sides of a stage, and make up a very important part of a theatrical company's outfit.

These immense canvases seemed to be all over,

and every time Dorothy tried to walk toward a door indicated by her guide, who had suddenly disappeared, she found she was in front of or behind some depiction of a building, or the side of a house or a street. Mechanics were busy all about her.

Suddenly a girl thrust her head from one of the many doors and shouted to an unseen person:

"Nellie! Nellie, dear! I'm ready for that ice-cream soda. Get into your street togs quick or you'll be having soup instead —"

"Nellie! Nellie!" came in a chorus from all sides, though the owners of the voices remained hidden, and then there rang out through the big space a spontaneous burst of a line from the chorus of the old song:

"I was seeing Nellie home. I was seeing Nellie home.
It was from Aunt Dinah's quilting party, I was seeing Nellie home."

"Ha! Ha! How's that, Nellie?" inquired a deep bass voice.

Dorothy stood for a moment, not knowing what to do. This was better than the play, she thought, as she vaguely wondered what sort of life must be

led behind the scenes. Then the thought of her position sent a chill over her. She must seek out the performer who went by the name of Miss Riceman, and then —

By this time a number of the characters appeared from their dressing rooms, and Dorothy stepped up to a girl with an enormous hat on her head, and a pair of very small shoes in her hand. As the girl sank gracefully down on an upturned box to adjust her ties, and, incidentally, to get a breath of air after the atmosphere of the stuffy dressing room, Dorothy asked timidly:

"Can you tell me where Miss Riceman's dressing room is?"

"That first door to the left," answered the girl, tilting her big hat back far enough to allow a glimpse of her questioner.

Dorothy stepped up to the door. Surely Tavia could not be there! Dorothy's heart beat furiously. She was trembling so she could hardly knock, but managed to give a faint tap.

"Who?" called a girlish voice.

"Miss Dale," answered Dorothy mechanically, feeling as if she would almost be willing to give up her search for Tavia if she could be well out of the place. There was a moment's wait and then the door swung open.

"Come in," invited the girl from within the little room. "Oh, you're Miss — let me see — I'm afraid I've forgotten your name — you're from the *Leader*, aren't you?"

"No," replied Dorothy, breathing easier, now that she found herself alone with a girl — a simple human being just like any other girl. "I am looking for — for a friend," she went on, stammeringly, "and I thought perhaps you could tell me — "

"You poor child," interrupted Miss Riceman whose, toilet was so unceremoniously interrupted "just come in and sit down on this trunk. Then let me get you something. You actually look ill."

"I'm just — just a little fri — frightened," Dorothy gasped, for indeed she was now feeling queer and dizzy, and it was all getting black before her eyes.

"Nettie!" called the actress, "get me some cold water and call to the girls in the 'Lair' and see if they have made coffee. Hurry now," to the woman who helped the actresses dress. Then she offered Dorothy a bottle of smelling salts. "Take a whiff of that," she said kindly. "The woman will be back soon with some ice water. I'm sorry you're not well. Was it the smell from the gas lights? I don't see why they make us poor

actresses put up with them, when they have electric light in front. It's abominable! And the smoke from the powder they use to make the lightning! It fairly chokes me," and she blew aside a curling wreath of vapor that sifted in through the door. A moment later the woman handed in a pitcher of water and a glass. "No coffee?" in answer to some message. "Well, all right."

The actress flew over to a box that served as a dresser and poured out a glass of water for Dorothy. As she did so Dorothy had a chance to look at Katherine, whom she imagined might be Tavia. There was not the slightest resemblance now that the actress had her "make-up" off. How could a little paint, powder and the glare from the footlights perform such a miracle, thought Dorothy. This girl was as different from Tavia as Dorothy was herself. And yet she did look so like her —

"Here's a nice drink of water," spoke Miss Riceman.

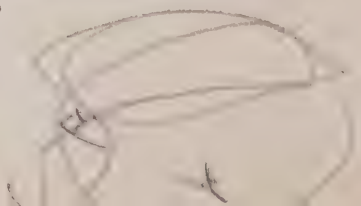
"Now please don't let me bother you so," pleaded Dorothy, sitting up determinedly and trying to look as if nothing was the matter. But she sipped the water gladly. "I'm quite well now, thank you, Miss Riceman, and I'll not detain you a moment longer from your dressing."

"Nonsense, child, sit still. You won't bother me the least bit. I'll go right on. Now tell me who it is you're looking for?"

Dorothy watched the actress toss aside a mass of brown hair that was so like Tavia's. Then she saw a string pulled and — the wig came off. The real, naturally blond hair of Miss Riceman fell in a shower over her shoulders.

Turning to Dorothy the performer instantly realized that the scene was new to her visitor and, with that strange, subtle instinct which seems to characterize the artistic professional woman, she at once relieved the situation by remarking:

"Do you know we never feel like removing our 'make-up' before the reporters. Even women representatives of the press (and of course we never admit any others to our dressing rooms) have such a funny way of describing things that I should be mortally afraid of taking off my wig before one. I thought you were Miss — Oh, what's her name — I never can think of it — from the *leader*. I expected her to call. But, do you know that women reporters are just the dearest set of rascals in the world? They simply can't help being funny when it's a joke on you. Now, whom did you say you were looking for? I do rattle on so!"



All this, of course, was giving Dorothy time — and she needed it badly, for her story was by no means ready for a "dress rehearsal."

But there was something so self-assuring about the actress — she was not in the least coarse or loud-spoken — she was, on the contrary, the very embodiment of politeness. Dorothy felt she could talk freely with her about Tavia.

"I am looking for a young girl named Octavia Travers," began Dorothy bravely, "and I thought possibly she might be with this company."

"Was she with this company previously? I don't seem to recall the name."

"Oh, I don't know that she is with any company," Dorothy hastened to add, feeling how foolish it must seem to be looking for a girl in a theatrical troupe when one had no more assurance that she might be with such a company than that she might be working in a department store.

"Haven't you her address?" asked Miss Riceman, as she stood before the glass, daubing on some cold cream to remove the last of the "make-up" from her face.

"No," answered Dorothy miserably enough. "I only wish I had."

The actress with the cream jar turned around in time to see the tears coming into Dorothy's eyes.

Miss Riceman dropped the jar down on her improvised dresser and came over to where her visitor sat on the trunk.

"Tell me all about it," she said kindly, sitting down beside Dorothy. "Perhaps I can help you. She is not your sister, is she?"

"No," was the answer, and then began a confidence of which Dorothy had scarcely believed herself capable. She told how Tavia was as much to her as a sister could be, and how she feared her chum had taken to the stage on account of her peculiarities while at school. Then Dorothy described Tavia's appearance — how pretty she was — what beautiful hair she had.

"And her eyes," Dorothy almost cried, "I have never seen eyes like Tavia's. They are as soft a brown as the inside of a chestnut burr."

"Exactly!" chimed in Miss Riceman. "I would not be surprised but that I saw that very girl the other day. It was in the manager's office. She came alone and she looked — well — I knew at once that she was a total stranger to the business. And when the manager asked how old she was (for they have to be particular about age you know) I think she said seventeen, but I knew she was not quite as old as that."

Dorothy clasped her hands in a strained gesture.

How she wanted to find Tavia, yet how she feared to discover her in this way!

"That might be her," she faltered thoughtfully.

"If it was, she is with a company playing on the same circuit we do," went on Miss Riceman. "Let me see," and she consulted a slip of paper pinned to the wall. "Yes, they follow us in some towns. It was the 'Lady Rossmore's Secret' company that the girl I am speaking about applied to, and I'm sure she was engaged, for I was interested in her appearance, and later I asked some one about her. Now the thing for you to do is to come to the manager's office here to-morrow afternoon, between five and six. He has control of several companies, including the one I'm with and the L. R. S. as we call it for short, the 'Lady Rossmore's Secret' I mean. Just ask him for your friend's address — or, better still, just ask where the company is playing and she'll be sure to be with it. He might not pay much attention to you if he thought you were looking for some one in particular and hadn't any clue to her whereabouts."

"I'll do it," said Dorothy determinedly, as she arose to go.

"Now don't leave here until you are positive

you feel all right," cautioned Miss Riceman. "I'm sure I'm very glad to have met you and I hope I have been able to help you. I'm sorry I can't tell you where the Rossmore company is, but I haven't made a memoranda of the complete booking as I sometimes do. I thought I had it on a slip of paper but I find I haven't."

"Oh, I'm sure you've helped me a lot," exclaimed Dorothy, hardly able to put her gratitude into words, but the busy little actress looked entirely satisfied with her visitor's thanks as she showed Dorothy the way out of the stage door. She smiled cheerily at her as she waved her hand in good-bye and then she went back behind the scenes again, to her dressing room to resume the removal of the "make-up" from her face.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CLUE

Outside the door Dorothy again felt that girlish inclination to collapse. What excuse could she make to her friends for her delay? How would she get back to them? Perhaps they were looking all over the city for her and they might have even notified the police of her absence.

All the novelty of the theatre that had, for the past half hour, put a world between Dorothy and those outside of the stage dressing rooms, was now dispelled. What would she say or do when she met Rose-Mary? How could she now conceal her worry and anxiety? How was she to continue her search for Tavia?

The stage door opened into a dismal, narrow alley. Here Dorothy found herself in the midst of a scurrying crowd of working people, for several large factories had just shut down. The girl stood for a moment and looked helplessly about her. Presently she felt an arm on her shoulder and started in alarm.

"Dorothy!" exclaimed a voice, and she turned to see Nat standing beside her.

"Oh, Nat! I'm so glad!"

"So am I. Just step along this way. I knew you hadn't come out the front way so I came here."

Dorothy pressed her shoulder against her cousin in a helpless, imploring sort of way. He seemed to know what the action meant for instantly he had ready to recite, a most plausible explanation of her disappearance.

"You got left behind and were frightened," he asked and answered in same breath. "I knew it — I told 'em all so. Then some of the ushers took you back and let you out of the stage door. Silly, to get alarmed over a little thing like that. But I couldn't talk to Mrs. Markin — she was almost in hysterics. We'd better hurry back to relieve her suspense."

"I should not have delayed talking, but really I was so — so frightened," ventured Dorothy.

"Cert you were. Well, you just let me tell the story. It will save lots of trouble, but of course the girls will have to know all about the people you met — behind the scenes."

Was ever there such a blessed boy as Nat? Here he had nicely explained all Dorothy's trou-

bles and in the simplest manner possible. How splendid boy cousins are, thought Dorothy. They have such a power of sympathy for girls — better than brothers — if girls would only allow them to exercise it — in a cousinly way.

Or did Nat know of Dorothy's deliberate visit to the little actress who had played Katherine? Perhaps some one had told him his cousin was in the dressing room and he had just waited for her to appear at the stage door. Dorothy was sure Nat would save her from making any troublesome explanations, and when he asked her, in the most matter-of-fact way if she happened to meet the girl with the brown hair who looked so much like Tavia, she had no hesitation in telling him that she was Miss Riceman, and that she was a most charming young lady.

"She doesn't look a bit like Tavia — close by," added Dorothy, remembering the scene in the dressing room. "She is as refined and polite as possible. She showed me the way out."

After telling that much of her adventure to Nat, Dorothy was well prepared to repeat the story to the others, without fear of disclosing the real object of her visit behind the scenes.

When Mrs. Markin was finally assured of Dorothy's safety, and had actually listened with inter-

est to her recital of the trip into stageland, and her encounters there, the matter was regarded as an incident fraught with untold curious bits of "real live adventure." Girls do delight in investigating and exploring the unusual quite as much as boys do, although the latter are prone to attribute that faculty to themselves as something patented.

So it happens that when a girl does actually have an experience she and her companions know how to appreciate the novelty. That was how it turned out with Dorothy and her friends. Rose-Mary and Alma couldn't hear enough of "behind the scenes" and Alma ventured to ask Dorothy to take them in through the stage door to make a second call on Miss Riceman, when she might introduce her friends to a real actress.

But Dorothy tried to appease their curiosity as best she could, telling over and over again how she got lost in the crowd, how the usher accosted her, and led her to the stage, and then how she got confused in her effort to find the "right door" (which was all true enough) and how it was then that Miss Riceman came out and invited Dorothy in. Then she related how she became faint and told of the water being brought, and so on, until the very closing of the stage door after her when she found herself in the alley with Nat at her side.

But now Dorothy was about to enter upon a delicate and what might prove to be a difficult adventure. She had to go to the manager's office the next afternoon, but beyond that point, she dared not trust herself to think or plan. When night came, and all seemed to be asleep Dorothy, in her room in the big hotel, had a chance to look the situation squarely in the face.

"One thought I must keep before me," she told herself. "I am bound to find Tavia and save her. To do this I will have to take great risks, and perhaps be very much misunderstood, but I must do it. Her risk is even greater than mine and if I appear to deceive people — even dear, good, thoughtful Nat,— I must do so to continue my search."

Then the girl, with aching head, planned how she could get away to see the theatrical manager the next day. She would not pretend to have any plans made for going out, and then, just before the hour Miss Riceman had told her the manager's office would be open, she would announce that she wanted to get some souvenirs of Buffalo to take home with her. This, she decided, would give her an opportunity to hurry away alone.

But, oh, how she dreaded to face that manager! If it were only a woman who was in charge of the

office, but a man! And she had heard vague stories of how dreadfully rude some managers were to persons who bothered them. There were so many questions she would have to ask — enough to put any manager into bad humor she thought — and perhaps there would be young girls there like Tavia looking for engagements — they would overhear what she had to say. Oh, it was dreadful, the more she thought of it!

Dorothy buried her head deeper into the pillow and tried to sleep. She felt that she must get some rest or she would not be able to carry on the work that demanded so much of her strength, her brains and her courage. She needed them all now to follow up the clue of Tavia's whereabouts given by Miss Riceman.

It was almost morning when Dorothy fell into an unquiet sleep, and it was glaring daylight, with the sun streaming into her window, when she awoke. Rose-Mary was moving about the room on tip-toe after some things, feeling the necessity of allowing Dorothy all possible rest, as she had appeared so exhausted after her experience of the previous day.

"I'm so sorry you are going away to-morrow," spoke Rose-Mary, seeing that Dorothy was awake. "This is the last day we will have together for

some time. I have enjoyed your visit so much."

"I'm afraid I've been rather stupid," apologized Dorothy, feeling as if she must make some excuse for her seeming indifference to Rose-Mary's entertainment. "But, Cologne dear, I can never tell you how grateful I am for this chance to see Buffalo. It seems as if I had really entered a new world since I came into this big city."

"Well, I'm glad you enjoyed everything, dear," said Rose-Mary. "But you must rest to-day and not go sight-seeing any more. You will need to be fresh for your auto trip to-morrow morning."

"Oh, yes, I'll rest to-day," replied Dorothy, as she slipped into her dressing-gown and approached the dresser. There she found a dainty array of remembrances Cologne had selected for her to take home. This was a surprise and it told Dorothy more plainly than words could, that Rose-Mary loved her, and so loved to make her happy.

There were some exquisite bits of undecorated china for Dorothy to add to her collection of hand-painted pieces, there was a "darling" little traveling mirror from Mrs. Markin, and Jack, who would not be left out in spite of his sister's protestations that a strange young man could not give a young lady a present even if it was a sort of souvenir of Buffalo, had made Rose-Mary place

on the table with the other tokens a cute little pocket camera. He secretly hoped his sister would just hint to Dorothy that he had selected it.

Such an array quite overpowered Dorothy and she threw her arms about Rose-Mary's neck and cried as if her heart would break.

She calmed down after a while, but even when she and Rose-Mary were dressed the two had little spells of weeping at the thought of parting. Jack peeped in at the door, but when he saw his sister and Dorothy in an embrace, with tears in their eyes, he hurried away, muttering something about " fool girls crying when they're happy," and he " guessed he wouldn't hang around to spoil their fun, if that was what they called a merry time."

So the two girls were left to themselves to exchange confidences and talk over their fall meeting at Glenwood when school should begin again.

Time managed to slip around quickly that day, and, when afternoon came, Dorothy began to get nervous about her prospective visit to the manager's office. It would surely seem rude to leave Rose-Mary alone, but nothing must deter her from carrying out her plan — no, not even the displeasure of her friends, and this was no small matter to Dorothy when she faced it — she who made

such firm friendships when she did make them, and who was always an example of good breeding and politeness.

When her valise had been packed, so that the entire evening might be left for pleasure, and Nat and Ned had appeared from their quarters to make final arrangements about coming for Dorothy directly after breakfast, she glanced at her watch and found it lacked just half an hour of five o'clock! The boys were engaged in an argument with Rose-Mary, as to the relative beauty of Boston and New York, Ned holding that a Battery and a Bowery made New York the winner.

Suddenly Dorothy jumped up from the porch chair where she had been sitting.

"I believe I'll just run down town to get some more souvenir postal cards," she said bravely, as she started to leave the veranda. She had her purse in her hand, and there was no need to wear a hat.

"Why?" asked Cologne in natural surprise. "I thought you had plenty."

Nat saw the flush of color that came into Dorothy's cheeks.

"And I'm with you!" he declared, getting up from his place and assisting his cousin down the steps. "So long," he called back. "Do the

best you can, Ned. I'll be back directly. Just want to make sure that Doro doesn't fall by the wayside again," and at that the two cousins bolted off laughing, Dorothy having recovered her composure when she saw how quickly Nat came to her relief. Ned and Rose-Mary were taken so by surprise at the sudden move that they seemed dazed, and the look on their faces at the bolt of the two only made the departing ones more merry.

"Nat," said Dorothy as they turned the corner, "I really wanted to go to some place —"

"Go ahead then," he answered, "only, Doro, you know Ned and I are responsible for you and you had best tell me about it. You know I won't interfere — only to be sure it's all right."

"Nat, you are such a good cousin," began Dorothy.

"Good?" echoed Nat. "Why, you don't say so? Make a note of that and tell the others — they would never believe me. There, did you see that streak of sunshine stick to my brow? It was a halo, sure thing. But, I say, what are you going to do, anyhow?"

"To look for Tavia," replied Dorothy miserably.

"Thought so. But where is the looking to be done this time?"

"I thought I would inquire at the office of the theatre. They might happen to know something."

"All right, come along. I'll wait outside. Theatre people, especially managers and those in the office, are usually very busy and won't keep you long."

This was said with all possible kindness, but, somehow, it gave Dorothy a cold chill. She was so afraid of facing the manager. Oh, if she only could let Nat go in with her! But that would not be fair to Tavia, whose secret, if she ever discovered it, she determined to keep inviolate. She must do it alone, and do it secretly to save Tavia from the possible consequences of her folly, should it turn out that she really was with a company "on the road."

One more block and Nat and Dorothy were in front of the theatre where they had attended the play the day before. They stood before the great open lobby, empty now save for a few workmen who were busy with mops scrubbing the tiled marble floor. Nat took Dorothy's arm.

"There's the office of the manager, right over

there," he said, indicating a small door that bore no mark to distinguish it from many others that opened from the foyer. "I'll wait here for you. Now, don't be afraid to push yourself up front if there's a crowd waiting for him. We haven't any too much time."

With all the courage that Dorothy could summon to her aid she walked up to the little door, opened it and stepped inside a little ante-room. She was in the manager's office, and the presence of several other persons, who turned to stare at her did not serve to put her at her ease.

CHAPTER XX

DOROTHY AND THE MANAGER

DOROTHY sank into a chair near the door. Two or three important-looking women were moving about restlessly, awaiting their turn to pass beyond the portal guarded by a stout youth, and face the manager in his private rooms. Others, younger and more timid, sat quite still in their chairs, as did Dorothy, and the girl could imagine that they were silently praying for success in the prospective interview with one who might decide their fate. Dorothy seemed beyond thinking consistently about her own circumstances; she just sat there and waited. The youth at the door of the private office looked at her sharply. Doubtless he was wondering whether she had an appointment, or whether she was one to be allowed to enter out of her turn because of some "pull."

It seemed to Dorothy that the very place rang with an appeal for place, for position — for opportunity, although not a word was spoken. But

the look on the faces of those waiting spoke louder than words.

Finally a girl in a red hat went in and came out so quickly that the others looked at her curiously. She murmured something that showed she had been treated with scant ceremony. Then a very stout woman, wearing an enormous veil brushed past Dorothy. She was not escorted in by the boy, but dashed past him as the girl in red came out. Then, when the woman with the excess of avoirdupois came out, the boy stepped up to Dorothy.

"Your turn," he said kindly. Then it occurred to Dorothy that every one so far had been kind to her. Were these people, that others had spoken of so slightingly, not all respectful and polite to any one who seemed to merit such consideration? She felt that they were not half as black as they had been painted.

The next moment the anxious girl was in the private office of the manager. It was a small room, but not gloomy in spite of the fact that it was in the midst of a darkened theatre. A fine rug was on the floor and there were a few well-chosen pictures on the walls, the electric lights showing them off to advantage.

While the manager, who sat in a big revolving chair, looked over some papers on his desk before turning to Dorothy, she had an opportunity to see that there hung before him what were evidently family photographs. One was of a little girl and another of a youth. Surely, she thought, a man who had time to look at his children's pictures during business hours could not be so very harsh because his time was taken up by a girl.

"Well?" asked the manager suddenly as he wheeled around in his chair, wiping his glasses carefully but not seeming to look at Dorothy.

She caught her breath with a gasp. The moment had come. Her heart was beating painfully.

"I — I came to — to ask if you — if you have on your books the name of a young lady — Miss Octavia Travers?" she managed to stammer out. "A young lady with the 'Lady Rossmore's Secret' company, I believe."

"Travers," repeated the manager thoughtfully, "Travers? Seems to me I have. Is she your sister?"

"Not exactly, but I have always regarded her as such — we have been very close friends all our lives."

"Not a very long time at that," remarked the manager with a smile. "But what is it you want to know about her?"

"To get her address."

"Let me see, I'll look it up — but if she is such a close friend of yours why didn't she send you her address? She knew where she was going to be," and he spoke pointedly.

Tears welled into Dorothy's eyes, and she felt that she could not trust herself to speak. The manager looked critically at her. Then he laid aside the book he had picked up to consult.

"Run away?" he asked.

Dorothy nodded.

"Well, don't feel so badly about it, my girl. We'll see if we can't find her for you. But first you had better tell me the story. It will help greatly. You see when we engage a girl and she happens to prove satisfactory we have no excuse for dismissing her unless she might be under age — and then her parents — of course —"

"But I must keep the entire matter from her parents," interrupted Dorothy. "I must find Tavia myself and I know when I do she will listen to me and it will be all right again."

Dorothy was visibly trembling. The manager folded his arms and looked at her thoughtfully.

"You're quite a young girl to undertake this," he said finally. "But I like your spirit, and I'm going to help you. I tell you, my child, the stage is no place for a young person who has had no experience with the ways of the world. I never encourage a young girl to go on the stage. There are plenty of older characters whom we can get and then there is less danger. But this girl you are looking for — was she about your height?"

"Yes, with very brown hair," replied Dorothy. "And such lovely light brown eyes."

"Let me see," and he consulted the book again. Dorothy waited anxiously, as he turned page after page. Then he stopped. "Yes, here it is," he said. "Christina Travers. That must be the girl. They rarely give the name just right."

"Yes, she might say Christina," admitted Dorothy. "The girls at school called her 'Chris' for short."

"Well, she is with the 'L. R. S' company — I beg your pardon, I mean the 'Lady Rossmore's Secret' company. We get in the habit of abbreviating it. It's a light thing we put on for a filler. I'm afraid it isn't doing any too well, which, however, may make it easier for you to induce your friend to give it up."

"Oh, I hope I can!" and Dorothy left her

seat and came to stand beside the manager's desk. She had lost nearly all her fear and nervousness now.

"They play in Rochester to-night," went on the manager consulting his list. "Then they go to Rockdale —"

"Only one night in Rochester?" asked Dorothy, showing some surprise and disappointment.

"Well, one night of that I fancy will be enough for any place," was the manager's laughing reply. "However, they may stay over to-morrow. But Rockdale is only a few miles from there. You could easily catch them at Rockdale. Is there anything more I can do for you?"

"No, thank you," and Dorothy turned away.

"If I can now, or later, just let me know," went on the manager. Then he wished her good bye and turned back to his desk.

Dorothy's cheeks were flushed when she stepped up to Nat in the lobby where he was watching the men putting in place the photographs of the next week's performers. He seemed to have forgotten all about his cousin.

"Oh, is that you?" he asked, and he looked like some one suddenly awakened from a dream. "I do believe if I stood here much longer I'd be

put into a frame by mistake. How did you make out?"

"You mustn't ask," answered Dorothy pleasantly. "You see I can't quite report on it yet."

"Oh, very well. I was only wondering —"

"But you mustn't wonder. You agreed to act as my escort and so you must be content with that. I can only tell you that I am perfectly satisfied with the interview I had."

"Which means that our little friend Tavia is not with any company. Well, I'm glad of it. I always did give her credit for having better sense. But you see, Doro, you are such a romancer that you sometimes make stories out of dreams. But I must say you do look ten years younger. That manager must have been a nice fellow."

"He was," answered Dorothy, glad that Nat, as usual, had jumped to a conclusion and decided the matter of the interview for himself, leaving her free to go on without contradicting or making any explanations. It was so much better under the circumstances, she thought, that not even Nat should know the truth.

But just how she was going to carry out the remainder of her task secretly she could not quite

determine. However, she had now become accustomed to doing each part as it presented itself, without planning further into the future, and, in that manner, she hoped to be able to proceed until the last link in the chain of her search had been completed.

"We must get the souvenir cards," Nat reminded her, as they came to a store with the pretty-pictured varieties in the window. "I'll just buy a pack of mixed ones — it will save time."

But Dorothy was not thinking of souvenir cards. Thoughts came to her of the play at Rochester, with Tavia as one of the characters — Tavia who must be timid amid her new and unaccustomed surroundings in spite of her apparent recklessness — yes, Tavia would be much frightened at what she had done, Dorothy was sure of it, when the girl, so far away from home and friends found herself before a critical audience in a theatre.

"If I could only reach her before another night," Dorothy thought, "but how can it be managed?"

The boys would start for home to-morrow, and of course Dorothy would have to go with them. Something would surely happen — *must* surely happen before then to help her, Dorothy

thought, with a confidence which great emergencies sometimes inspire.

"Now I suppose," remarked Nat, as he made his way out of the post-card store, "if you were to send one of these particularly bright red ones to Tavia at Dalton she would send one back on the next mail, wishing you a merry Christmas, for all your trouble. What do you suppose she would say if she knew of the merry chase that had been going on after her, and all the places you have been looking for her? And all the while she was as safe as little Bo-peep."

"But I don't intend to send her any cards until she writes me first," answered Dorothy. "She owes me an apology for not writing to me."

"Same here," said Nat. "I'll treat her the same way. The saucy little thing," he added facetiously, "not to answer our nice long letters. She ought to be slapped."

Dorothy laughed at her cousin's good humor. It was better that he should take this view of the case than that he should suspect the real facts. Dorothy glanced at some of the cards as they hurried along back to the hotel.

"Now there's one," pointed out Nat, "that would just suit the circumstances. A girl doing a song and a smile — that's the 'turn' Tavia has

been doing to you, Doro. We must save that one for her."

"Yes," answered Dorothy abstractedly, taking the card in her hand. It was the picture of a girl in chorus costume, and was enscribed with an appropriate verse.

"Don't you see," explained Nat, "they've got everything down to a post-card basis now. That one is intended to be used in place of making a party call when a gentleman has blown a girl to a theatrical good time. She just sends this card back and that suffices for formal thanks.

"Of course it might not just suit our set," he conceded, "but for those in the post-card clientele it's a cinch, as the poet says. I tell you after a while we will be able to carry on all our business correspondence with picture postals and not be under the necessity of writing a word. Great scheme, Nat (patting himself on the left shoulder with his right hand), get a patent on your new post-card."

They had now reached the hotel. The veranda was deserted as the hour for dinner was almost at hand and the guests were dressing. Nat left Dorothy at the elevator, with a warning to be ready early in the morning. Then he hurried to where he and Ned were staying.

CHAPTER XXI

ADRIFT IN A STRANGE CITY

In spite of Dorothy's courage, and her efforts to keep each of her troubles apart, that she might meet and cope with them singly, the time had now come when she found herself sorely puzzled.

How would she be able to reach Rochester — to leave her cousins and proceed alone in her seach for Tavia?

The morning of departure dawned bright and clear, conditions most necessary for a pleasant automobile trip, and when the Markin family waved an affectionate adieu, the Fire Bird puffed away from in front of the hotel, Rose-Mary throwing innumerable kisses to Dorothy. Suddenly, as they swung into the street, Dorothy turned to Ned and asked:

"Ned, could you let me go part of the way home by train? I did not want to mention it at the hotel as Mrs. Markin would be sure to worry, but I would so like to return by rail. You could

just leave me at the depot and then — you might stop for me at — did you say you were going through Rochester on your way back?"

Ned and Nat gazed at their cousin in surprise. What could she mean to ask to leave them and go to North Birchland alone?

"I know you think it strange," she hastened to add, "but really you know, I am able to travel alone that short distance. You know I came from Glenwood alone."

"Oh, yes, I know," replied Nat, "but this time mother put you in our charge and these are big cities around here."

"But if the auto makes you feel ill," put in Nat, "of course no one could object to you going by train."

"I would so much rather," declared Dorothy, taking advantage of Nat's ready excuse for her. "I have found that there is a train at eight-thirty. Then, if you pass through Rochester, you could meet me there. I can go to some young women's club and wait if I do not meet you exactly on time at the station."

This was a brave stroke, and Dorothy felt that she would not be equal to further argument should the boys offer much more opposition.

"You mean for us to leave you here at the

Buffalo depot?" asked Ned in a dazed sort of way.

"Yes, I have plenty of money with me, and I know perfectly well how to travel alone."

"But you may have to change cars, and suppose you were to be left alone in Rochester in case we had a breakdown and couldn't pick you up?"

"It wouldn't be any worse staying in Rochester than it would in some place near where you happened to have the accident. I hope you don't have any. But I have told you what I would do in case you didn't call for me. I'd stay at some girls' club. There are plenty of them in Rochester I've read."

"Well," admitted Ned. "I suppose you ought to know what you want to do."

"There's the station," exclaimed Nat. "What time did you say the train left?"

"Eight-thirty," replied Dorothy. "We have plenty of time."

But when she realized that she was to be left alone, to go in a train to that strange, big city, she felt as if she must cry out against the circumstances that forced her to all this trouble. Why should she deceive her two kind cousins, and desert them to take that risky journey alone? And she did believe her prospective trip dangerous in

spite of her assertions to the contrary. It was very different to making the journey to Glenwood when she had had Tavia with her.

Besides, going into the New England mountains was along a quiet way, while this trip — she dared not trust herself to think further. She must decide at once, and she must go — alone to look for Tavia.

"I'll get you a Pullman ticket," Ned said rather gloomily, as the auto dashed up to the station, "but I do wish, Doro, that you would come on with us. Of course, in the parlor car you will be quite safe, and can rest better than in the Fire Bird. I'll see the porter and have him look after you."

"Thank you, Ned," Dorothy managed to reply, and, but for his haste to make arrangements for her comfort, the youth would have seen tears in his cousin's eyes, and noticed that her hands trembled as Nat helped her out of the machine to the station platform.

"I think, after all, it will be better for you to go straight on to North Birchland," she said, trying to make her voice sound easy and natural, but conscious that her tones were rather unsteady. She was now putting into operation the second part of her plan. "It might be risky to attempt

to pick me up in Rochester. I might miss you or you might miss me, whereas if we both follow out our route separately we will be sure to get to the Cedars in safety and without any delay."

"Well, since you have decided to desert us, and travel by train, leaving the poor old Fire Bird to struggle along as best it can without a lady passenger, perhaps it will be best," Nat agreed, in a dazed sort of way. He seemed for a time quite unlike Nat White — quite different from the youth who was always ready to take up the weak end of an argument and carry it to the strongest point of conclusion. Here he was letting his favorite cousin start away alone on a train to a strange big city, when she had been entrusted to his care.

"Here you are, Doro," called Ned, coming from the depot where he had hurried as soon as the auto stopped. "Take this," and he thrust some bills into her hands, as well as her tickets. "And do, above everything else, be careful. I've seen the porter, and tipped him so he will look after you. Now, you'd better get in and we'll leave you as we want to make good time. Good-bye," and he stooped to kiss the pale-faced girl who was now too overcome with emotion to trust her own voice.

Nat put his arm affectionately around her and he, too, gave her a farewell kiss. They walked with her to the waiting train, and then the porter, in his blue uniform, adorned with numerous brass buttons, helped her aboard the car "Seneca."

CHAPTER XXII

IN DIRE DISTRESS

DOROTHY had traveled in parlor cars before but had never ridden in a sleeper, which was the style of coach she now found herself in. The train was a through one from the west and, as the regular parlor cars were full Ned had to get a ticket in the sleeper which, by day, is much the same as a parlor car.

As the porter set her valise down and arranged a seat for her near the ladies' retiring room Dorothy's heart beat fast, and, though the surroundings were new and novel to her she took no interest in them. But as the train whistled off, and the other passengers began moving about, Dorothy lifted her head and glanced around.

For a moment she felt that some mistake had been made. Surely this was no train for ladies, for not a woman was in sight, instead the entire car seemed filled with men in various stages of incomplete toilets. Some were adjusting their neckties as they walked through the aisle, others were

fastening shoe laces, and a few buckling their belts or slipping on their coats.

Then she noticed, for the first time, that the car was a sleeper, for the interior was so dark because of the train shed when she entered that she could not tell what it was. She saw the berths on both sides, with heavy curtains lining the aisle. Only one or two beds had been shut up and turned into seats like the one she was occupying.

Dorothy was annoyed. Was she to make her lonely trip in company with a car full of men? She had expected, when she planned her journey, that there would be other girls and ladies in the coach in which she was to travel, and that she might appeal to them in case of need. But a whole car full of men!

She looked about for the little electric call button, and, finding it in the casement at the side of the window, pressed it vigorously. It was some time before the porter responded as, all along his route, the omnipresent men claimed his attention for various services. But finally he reached the end of the car where the girl in the blue sailor suit sat up very prim and stiff, waiting for him.

"Is this — er — a ladies' car?" she asked timidly.

"A ladies' car? Oh, yes, miss. This is all right. This is the car for Rochester."

"But I — never was in a car like — like this before," Dorothy objected, glancing about at the men who were still struggling in the aisles with various refractory articles of clothing.

For a moment the porter seemed puzzled. Then, all at once, he understood Dorothy's objection.

"Oh, them's only the gentlemen gettin' ready to leave, miss. They'll all be out soon, and you'll have more room. Anything I can do for you, miss?"

"No," and Dorothy just checked herself from adding "thank you," which she felt would not be quite proper, and would show that she was unused to the attention of a porter. Then the colored attendant made his way down the aisle, while the only girl in the car held her face close against the window pane and fell to thinking of the task that lay before her.

She was not now troubled about the car and the occupants. If it was all right, and she would be brought safely to Rochester in it, that was all she had to consider. Of course it would have been less lonely to have had the usual day coach passen-

gers with her, but she thought Ned must have selected this car and she felt he knew best. Then, too, the porter had said the men were rapidly leaving their berths and as soon as they did so the colored man made the folding beds into broad velvet seats, similar to the one occupied by Dorothy.

When these seats had replaced the hanging curtains, and the comfortable places were occupied by the men who had been so lately sleeping, even though there were no women among them, Dorothy recovered from her first shock of embarrassment. The passengers all appeared to be gentlemen and not one of them seemed to even glance in her direction, though they must have realized how strange it was for a pretty girl to be the lone female passenger.

When the spasm of brushing clothes into which the porter threw himself, was finally over, which operation Dorothy could not help watching for it was done with such dispatch, and when the men had gone to the dining car for breakfast or become engrossed in their newspapers, she tried to map out her day's programme.

"I will get off at Rochester," she told herself, "and then I'll inquire for the Criterion Theatre." She looked at the slip of paper which she carried so carefully in the little brown leather wrist bag.

"Then," she went on, "if the company has left Rochester I will go to Rockdale. But if it should get dark!" she cried in a low wail of terror. "If it should get dark and I should be all alone in a strange city!"

Then came the thought of the folks at home and how they would worry if night came on and she did not reach them. Was ever a girl so situated?

All sorts of dangers flashed before her mind, and now, though too late, she realized sharply how unfit a young girl is to cope with a big, strange world, how little the world cares for a girl's tender feelings, and how cold and heartless it is when she tries to make her way through the city streets alone, yet crowded on every side by a throng of other human beings.

"But Tavia had to go through it," concluded Dorothy, "and I must not be less brave than was she."

The train was somewhat delayed on the run from Buffalo to Rochester, so it was almost noon when Dorothy reached the latter city.

On a slip of paper she had the directions of the theatre she wished to visit, and at the ticket station learned where the building was located. Then off she started, with never a look at the shop windows filled with wonderful displays of all kinds.

She soon found the amusement resort, and stepping into the lobby, approached the ticket window and asked timidly:

"Can you tell me where the 'Lady Rossmore's Secret' company is playing to-night?"

The man looked at her sharply. Then he smiled so ironically that Dorothy's heart gave a painful thump, and a great lump came into her throat.

"'Lady Rossmore's Secret' company," he repeated, with the most prolonged and distracting drawl. "I guess there isn't any. It's down and out. Didn't play to a house here last night big enough to pay the gas bills."

"But the members of the company?" asked Dorothy with a choke in her voice.

"Hum! How should I know?" he asked with a sneer. "In jail, maybe, for not paying their board bills."

For a moment Dorothy felt that she must cry out and tell him that the matter was very vital to her — that she must find a young and friendless girl who was a member of the company; but she realized what sort of a man he was and her better judgment asserted itself.

"But are there any members of the company in this city?" she persisted bravely, trying to keep

up her courage, so as to get a clue as to the whereabouts of Tavia.

"In this city?" he repeated with the same distracting drawl. "Well, no. They managed to get out of here before the sheriff could attach their baggage and the scenery, which he was ready to do. They certainly were as poor a company as we ever had in this theatre. It was awful. Oh, no, they didn't dare stay here."

"Then where did they go?"

"Rockdale was their next booked place, but maybe they didn't dare go there, for fear some word had been sent on ahead," the ticket seller sneered.

"How can I get to Rockdale?" asked the girl, trying to keep back her tears.

"Get there on a train, of course," and the man turned back to the paper he had been reading when Dorothy came in. Perhaps he was angry because she had not purchased a ticket to the current attraction.

"If you would be — be kind enough to direct me," pleaded Dorothy. "I am a stranger here, and I must find a — a young girl who is with that company."

Something in her voice and manner seemed to touch the rather indifferent man, for he straight-

ened up in his tall chair and looked squarely and more kindly at Dorothy.

"Oh, that's it, is it? I didn't know. I have a lot of silly girls always asking about traveling companies after they've left here, and I thought you might be one of them. Now you're talking. Yes, of course, certainly. If you've got to find anybody connected with that company you'd better be quick about it, for I should think there wouldn't be much left of 'em by this time. I heard they had quite a time of it getting their trunks away from here. Held up for board, you know. But of course they're used to that sort of thing."

Dorothy took hold of the brass rail in front of her as she turned away from the window. She felt as if she could hardly stand any more of the man's veiled insinuations. But it might not be true — surely it could not be true — it was only his cruel, teasing way. Tavia could not be in such distress.

"How can I get there?" Dorothy repeated.

"If you want to get to Rockdale," the ticket seller answered after a pause, "you can take the train at twelve forty-five."

"Thank you," murmured Dorothy, turning dizzily toward the street to make her way to the station she had so recently left. How she man-

aged to reach the place she never knew. The great buildings along the way seemed about to topple over on her head. Her temples were throbbing and her eyes shot out streaks of flashing light. Her knees trembled under her. If only she had time to get something to eat! But she must not miss that train. It might be the last one that day.

Through the crowd of waiting persons she made her way to the ticket office and purchased the slip of cardboard that entitled her to a ride. She learned that the train was late and that she would have to wait ten minutes. Grateful for that respite Dorothy turned to the little lunch counter to get a sandwich and some coffee. But, before she had reached the end of the big depot where refreshments were sold, she suddenly stopped — some one had grabbed her skirt.

Turning quickly Dorothy beheld a crouching, cringing figure, almost crawling so as to hide herself in the crowd.

"Girl!" cried Dorothy, trying to shake off the grasp on her skirt. "Let me go! What do you want?"

"Don't you know me?" whispered the miserable creature. "Look again — don't you know — Urania, the Gypsy girl?"

Then beneath the rags and the appearance of age that seemed, in so short a time to have hidden the identity of this young girl, Dorothy did recognize Urania. How wretched — how forlorn she was; and even in danger of arrest if she was seen begging in the depot.

"Don't turn away from me, Miss!" pleaded the unfortunate Gypsy girl. "Please help me!"

She stretched out to Dorothy a dirty, trembling hand. The gate to the Rockdale train had been thrown open, and Dorothy felt that the time was almost up.

"You should go home," she said, dropping a coin into the outstretched palm.

"Yes, yes, I want to go home," cried the girl, and Dorothy was afraid her voice would attract attention in the crowd. But the passengers were too busy rushing for their trains to heed anything else. "I want to go home," pleaded Urania. "You should take me home,— it was your fine cousin — the boy with the taffy-colored hair — that brought me here!"

"What!" cried Dorothy. "How dare you say such a thing?"

"Ask him, then, if it isn't so. And ask him if he wasn't in this very station an hour ago, looking for some one — that red-headed girl, likely."

"Do you mean to say you saw my cousin here to-day?" gasped Dorothy. "Come; tell me the truth and you shall go home — I'll take you home myself — only tell me the truth."

"Yes, I'll do it," answered the girl. "Well, him and his brother came in here an hour ago. They asked the man at the window if he had seen a young girl with a brown hand bag. I stood near to listen, but kept out of sight. Then they dashed off again before I could ask them for a penny, or throw it up to that dandy that it was the ride he gave me in the auto that brought me to this."

"Don't talk so!" exclaimed Dorothy, much shocked. "Do you want to go back to the camp where your people are?" She was too dumfounded at the news to argue with the wild creature.

"Yes, oh, yes, back to the camp!" and Urania's eyes flashed. "They'll take me back. Even Melea would not turn me out now for I am sick and sorrowful."

It needed but a glance to see that in this, at least, the girl spoke truthfully.

"Come," ordered Dorothy, "I'll take care of you. But first I must get something to eat. We have a few minutes."

Without heeding the attention she attracted by almost dragging the beggar girl up to the lunch counter, Dorothy made her way there and ordered coffee and sandwiches for both. She hurriedly disposed of her own share, being only a little behind Urania, who ate as though famished. Then, hastily procuring another ticket, she bolted through the door, followed by the Gypsy, who seemed to take it all as a matter of course.

The ride was, for the most part, a silent one. Dorothy was busy with her thoughts, and the Gypsy girl was almost afraid to speak.

"But you will see me to my home — to the camp?" she pleaded once.

"Yes," answered Dorothy. "But you must have patience — I have something more important to attend to first."

"I can wait," answered the little Gypsy.

The Rockdale station was a brick structure, with a modest waiting-room for women passengers at the far end. It was there that Dorothy took Urania as they left the train which steamed away into the distance. The room was without a single occupant, a matter of rejoicing to Dorothy, as she had already experienced considerable difficulty in passing with Urania through the ordinary marts of travel.

"TAVIA!" SCREAMED DOROTHY, SPRINGING FORWARD

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"Now you stay here," she told the Gypsy girl, "and I'll go out and get you something. You must be sure to stay in this corner, and eat carefully so as not to make crumbs. If the station agent should speak to you while I'm gone, just tell him you are waiting for — for a lady, who told you not to leave this room until she returned."

Willingly enough Urania sank down on a corner of the bench, and tried to smile her thanks at Dorothy. But Dorothy was too excited to notice the feeble effort. She hurried to a little store opposite the station, bought some crackers and cakes, and after putting the package into the Gypsy's hands, with another word of caution, was off again, this time to find the Lyceum Theatre.

It seemed to Dorothy that any place must be easy to find in a small town, and when she was directed to the theatre by a man on the street, she was not surprised to find that it was but a few blocks from the depot.

Hurrying along, she reached a big hall, for the Lyceum, in spite of its name, was nothing but a big country hall, with the additional attraction of iron fire escapes. She knocked at the big broad wooden door, but soon discovered that the place was locked up and, evidently, deserted. She made a number of inquiries of boys she saw nearby, but

all the information she could elicit from the urchins amounted to nothing more than laughter and "guying" to the effect that the company had come to grief in its attempt to give Rockdale folks a hint as to what Lady Rossmore's "Secret" was. It appeared that the company had arrived in town, but had at once gotten into legal difficulties because of some trouble back in Rochester.

"But where are the members of the company?" Dorothy asked of one boy who was larger than his companions, and who had not been so ready to make fun of the unfortunates.

"Some's gone back home I guess, that is if they has homes — some's hanging 'round the hotel, where their trunks was attached as soon as the baggage man brought 'em in — some's sitting around on the benches in the green. Guess none of 'em had any dinner to-day, for them hotel people is as mean as dirt."

"Where is the hotel?"

"That's the hotel, over there," answered the boy, pointing to a building on the opposite corner. "Mansion House, they call it, though I never could see much of a mansion about that old barn."

The afternoon was wearing away and Dorothy felt that she must make all possible haste if she

was to get back to North Birchland that night, as she knew she must for her own sake. So, thanking the boy she hurried over to the hotel, and, after making some inquiries of a number of loungers on the broad, low veranda, was directed to the office.

She asked some questions regarding the whereabouts of members of the theatrical company, but the man at the dingy old desk was inclined to make inquiries himself, rather than answer Dorothy's. He wanted to know if she had called to settle up for any of the "guys" and if not he demanded to know if she took him for a bureau of information or a public phonograph, and he grinned delightfully at his feeble wit.

"I don't keep tabs on every barn-storming theatrical company," he growled out. "Much as I kin do to look after their baggage and see they don't skin me — that's my game in a case like this."

Dorothy pleaded with him to give her any information he might have as to the whereabouts of any girl or woman member of the company, but he was ugly, evidently because of the loss of some money or patronage in connection with the theatrical fiasco, and would not give so much as an encouraging word.

Dorothy looked about but could see no one who seemed to be an actor or actress. She had learned in a measure to know the type. Fairly sick and disheartened she turned away. How could she give up now, when she felt that Tavia must be almost within hearing of her voice? How loudly her heart cried out! Surely some kind fate would bear that cry to Tavia's ear and bring her to her friend Dorothy — for now Dorothy felt that she could hardly go many steps farther in her weary search.

She heard a train steam into the station and go on without making a stop.

"Oh," thought Dorothy, "if we could only get a train back again soon! But I can not give her up! I must — must find her wherever she is!"

Exhausted and discouraged, she sank down by the roadside at a grassy spot where the street turned into a country park. She felt that she must cry — she would feel better when she had cried — out there alone — away from the cruel persons — away from the seemingly cruel fate that was so relentlessly urging her on beyond her strength — beyond the actual power of human endurance. Was there ever so wretched a girl as

was Dorothy Dale at that moment? Yes, she would indulge in a good cry — she knew it would relieve her nerves — and then she could go on.

The rough boys, playing nearby saw the girl sitting beside the road and, whether out of kindness or curiosity they hastened over to the place and stood looking down at Dorothy in respectful silence.

"Did they do anyt'ing to youse?" asked a little fellow with a ring of vengeance in his small, shrill voice. "Dem hotel guys is too fresh, an' me fader is goin'— he's goin' t' do somet'ing to dem if dey don't look out."

"Dat's right," spoke up another. "His fader is de sheriff an' he's goin' t' 'rest 'em, if dey don't pay der own bills, fer all der talk of holdin' de show trunks."

Dorothy raised her head. Surely these boys were trying to comfort her in their own rough but earnest way. Perhaps they could help her look for Tavia.

"Do any of you know where the girls of this company are now?" she asked of the boys collectively. "I am searching for a girl with brown hair —"

She stopped abruptly, realizing how useless it

would be to give these boys a description of Tavia.

"I sawr a girl wit a big kind of a hat and a little satchel, an' I know she was wit de show," volunteered a red-haired urchin. "I was right alongside of her when she bought five cents' wort' of cakes at Rooney's, an' after dat I seen her sittin' on a bench in de green."

"Honest?" asked an older boy severely, turning to the one who had given the information. "No kiddin' now, Signal, or we'll blow out your red light," this reference being to the boy's brilliant hair. "We want t' help dis gurl t' find de young lady, don't we fellers?"

"Sure," came in a ready chorus.

"I did see her," protested Signal, rubbing his hand over his fiery locks and rumpling them up until they looked like a brush heap ablaze. "I sawr her less 'n hour ago."

"Where?" asked Dorothy, eagerly.

"On a bench in de green." And the lad pointed out the direction to Dorothy.

She followed the road to the end and there, stretching out before her was an open common, or the green, as the boys called it. In the centre was a little park, where a pretty fountain sent a spray of sparkling water high into the air. Arranged

about it were benches, under shady bowers formed by overhanging bushes, and there were clumps of shrubbery that separated the seats, and concealed them.

Dorothy walked straight to the fountain. She sank down on a bench where she could watch the spurting water and listen to the cool tinkle as it fell into the basin. The sun shone through the spray, making a small rainbow.

It looked like a sign of hope, but she was too discouraged and dispirited to place much faith in it. She wanted to see Tavia; yet where was she? Here was the park the boys had spoken of, but there was no sign of the missing girl.

Dorothy felt she could not stay there long. After a few minutes' rest she arose to make a circuit of the little park, hoping she might have overlooked some spot where Tavia might be. As she crossed back of a clump of shrubbery she saw the skirt of a girl's dress showing on the border of a little side path. It riveted her attention. She turned down the path.

There sat a girl — a most forlorn looking girl — her head buried in her arms that rested on the back of a bench. Dorothy could see her shoulders heaving under the stress of heavy sobs.

She started! She held her breath! It looked

like — yet could it be her — was it — she feared to ask herself the question.

The girl on the bench raised her tear-stained face. She looked full at Dorothy.

"Tavia!" screamed Dorothy, springing forward.

"Dorothy!" echoed Tavia.

There was a rush, and the next instant Dorothy Dale held Tavia clasped close in her arms, while she murmured, over and over again:

"Tavia! Dear Tavia! I have found you at last! Oh, I am so glad!"

Tavia could only sob.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SECRET — CONCLUSION

It was some moments before either girl was able to speak after that first burst of emotion and surprise. But Dorothy was too happy to remain long in tears — even tears of joy that for the moment had overcome her.

Tavia was pale, and her eyes were red from much weeping. Her unhappy plight was apparent at a glance, and this was incentive enough to cause Dorothy to again clasp her in her arms and hug her tighter than ever. She had forgotten her own physical weakness now that she had found Tavia, and she felt that she must hasten to get her dear friend into a state of mind that might help her to forget the sad experiences she had passed through.

"Tavia! Tavia, dear," whispered Dorothy, as the girl fell again to weeping, "do look up and forget it all — for my sake, do. I have searched so long for you, but now I have found you. Come

with me and we'll be just the same as we always were."

"Oh, how can I?" cried the miserable girl. "Who will look at me now? How can I ever face the folks again? Oh, Dorothy, let me go away forever! I can not bear the disgrace!" and she moaned pitifully in her bitter anguish.

"But, Tavia, you really meant nothing wrong," said Dorothy taking the trembling hands in her own which were scarcely less agitated.

"No, I never meant to do wrong," spoke Tavia, lifting her head with her old, proud bearing. "I broke my promise to you — I listened to that girl in Rochester — she gave me a letter to a theatrical manager in Buffalo. I only wanted to make a name for myself — to gratify my ambition — I wanted to earn money to get back to school — you know we had no more —"

"You poor darling!" whispered Dorothy. "Was that it? Don't worry so. No one will ever know. I have not told even Nat, and we will keep it a secret between us forever. Do come with me, dear," as Tavia appeared to look brighter. "I must get to North Birchland to-night — Oh, if you ever knew the time I had getting away from the boys!" And she went on hurriedly for several minutes.

"And did you come all the way alone, Dorothy Dale? You have saved me in spite of myself!" declared Tavia, almost tragically. "Yes, I will go back. I can look them all in the face, for I only tried to work and I did not mean to deceive any one longer than would be necessary for me to get a start. But now, Dorothy, I have had enough of it. Where do you want me to go?"

"So it wasn't as nice as you thought it would be?" asked Dorothy, anxious to hear some of Tavia's experiences.

"Nice?" There was no concealing the disgust in Tavia's voice. "It was awful, Dorothy! It was a regular barn-storming company! Playing one-night stands! We never had good houses. They said it was because it was the summer season, but I guess it was because the play was so poor. We did not get all our salaries and half the time didn't have enough to eat. Then the show 'busted'!"

"Did you have a good — part I believe they call it?"

"A good part? Say, Doro," and Tavia actually seemed her old self again. "I had an idea I was to be Lady Rossmore, or at least one of the family."

"Weren't you?"

"I should say not! I was Lucy, the parlor maid, and the only time I was on the stage was when I was dusting the make-believe furniture. And as for my lines — well, I had a very heavy and strong thinking part."

"Oh, Tavia!"

"That's my theatrical experience," answered Tavia. "Oh, Doro, I'm very miserable," she wailed again.

"Never mind, dear. Dry your eyes now, you're all right. I'm — Oh, I'm so happy that I have found you again. Come back to the station with me. I have some one else to bring home, too. Urania, the Gypsy girl — you remember her at Glenwood, I guess — she has been trying to see the world and she caught too big a glimpse of it. Poor girl, she is quite sick and miserable."

Then, as they hurried from the park, Dorothy told Tavia of the trouble she had to get Urania on the train. A happy thought came to Tavia, and, with a bright smile she said:

"I have it! In this little hand bag — all the baggage I have left by the way — I have a very quiet suit. I used it in the play, for sometimes I had to take two or three parts if one of the other girls was ill, but they never amounted to much —

the parts I mean. We can put this suit on Urania."

Being thus able to help some one else worse off than herself seemed to do Tavia good for her kind heart always prompted her to acts of this sort. It was a step back into the old life.

At the station they found Urania all excitement.

"The young men were here!" she exclaimed to Dorothy, "and they have gone off to look for you. I didn't dare speak to them, but I peeked out and I heard the station man tell them where he had seen you go to, and they flew off again in their dust-wagon like mad. Oh, Miss, I wish they had found you, and they looked so tired and hardly spoke like I've always heard 'em, so polite and nice."

"Ned and Nat here in Rockdale!" exclaimed Dorothy, overjoyed at the news. "Here, Urania, you go in that little room and put these things on you'll find in this bag," and she handed the Gypsy Tavia's little valise.

"I'll help her," volunteered Tavia, glad to be of service to Dorothy.

"Now remember, Tavia," said Dorothy in a low tone, "whoever we meet now I'm to do all the talking. This is my big secret and you must

let me take care of it. Have you any baggage — Oh, I forgot, all the baggage of the company is held for debts, I believe."

"Not mine," replied Tavia promptly. "All I have is in my valise. It was so small they let me keep it. They only wanted trunks and I didn't have any. I travel light."

"Well, hurry now and get Urania ready," said Dorothy. She walked over toward the door of the ladies' waiting room. Suddenly she fancied she heard — yes — sure enough that was the toot of the Fire Bird's horn!

"Oh, Tavia!" she called. "Here they come! Hurry! Hurry Urania! Tavia! We must all be out there together when they come up."

At that the automobile swept up to the station in a cloud of dust. Out on the platform hurried Dorothy, Tavia and Urania, the latter smiling broadly in her new outfit.

"Well, I give up!" exclaimed Nat, the first to alight from the panting car. "If you haven't given us a merry chase, Dorothy! We got worried after you left us and we traced you from place to place. Thought sure we'd lost you here. Oh, it was a merry chase."

"Glad it was merry," exclaimed Tavia, forgetting that Dorothy was to do all the talking.

"Yes, I should say it was," put in Ned, "and she skipped off to meet you without giving us a hint —"

"Now, Ned, don't be cross," said Dorothy sweetly. "See what a large party you have to take home. And you must not scold the girls, for we have as much right as you boys have to take little trips together."

The boys were too well pleased to argue or be angry. In fact, they had had a very miserable time of it since Dorothy "escaped," as they called it. Now, they wanted nothing better than to get into the machine with the girls and make all speed for home.

"Have you room for Urania?" asked Dorothy. "Can she stand up between the seats?"

"Why, of course," assented Ned. "Plenty of room. Get aboard everybody."

"Let me get under the seat," protested the Gypsy girl. "That was the way I came out."

"So it was!" said Nat. "I'd almost forgotten about you, young lady. "She's the girl," he went on, turning to the others, "who stole a ride with me the day I went into Dalton, Dorothy. She actually rode under the back seat where she'd hidden in the night. She made the noise we thought was a burglar, you know. She gave me

the slip, though, when I went to take her back, so now she must ride in the open, where I can keep my eye on her."

"Oh, Urania! You said —" began Dorothy, thinking of what the Gypsy girl had said about Nat taking her away.

"Oh, please don't be hard on me," pleaded Urania. "I was so miserable I didn't know what I was saying. It's true, just as he says, and it's all my fault. I ran away. He didn't take me."

Dorothy climbed in beside Ned. Tavia was in her usual seat with Nat. Then Urania squatted down, in true Gypsy fashion, on the floor of the car at their feet.

"I guess we'll just about make it after all," commented Ned, as he turned on the power more fully and threw in the clutch. "We're due home about seven, but we'll have to speed it up a bit to do it. Lucky it's nearly level all the way."

"And when we do get home," put in Nat, "you girls will just have to own up and tell the whole story. No serial for ours. We want it complete in one number."

"Indeed, we'll do nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Dorothy. "We're not going to tell you a single word. We'll get home about on time,

according to agreement, and you have no reason to find a single bit of fault. Tavia will come to North Birchland just as she promised to early in the season. She's been too busy to come before," and Dorothy smiled. "And if we do have our own affairs to talk about you must not expect to know everything. Girls have to have secrets, or they wouldn't be girls, and we have now got ours."

"Yes," agreed Tavia in a low voice with a loving look at her chum, "It's Dorothy's great secret and I guess I'll help her keep it."

And here, as they are speeding toward North Birchland, we will take leave of Dorothy, Tavia and the boys for a while. Dorothy kept the secret, as did Tavia, and no one ever knew the real meaning of Tavia's absence, nor why Dorothy was so anxious to find her. The theatrical venture was never disclosed, thanks to Dorothy's tact and abilities, for she showed that she could manage some things even better than could her cousins.

"Well, it was a glorious trip to Buffalo after all," was Nat's comment, as they neared North Birchland.

"So it was," agreed Dorothy. Then she fell to wondering if she would ever again have so many adventures. Little did she dream of what

the future held in store, as will be related in another story, which I shall call, "Dorothy Dale and Her Chums."

"Running some, aren't we?" said Ned, as the Fire Bird whizzed over the country road.

"I — I don't mind it," faltered Tavia. Then she turned to whisper to Dorothy. "I am so thankful to leave the — that behind!"

Dorothy only smiled, but that smile showed that she understood perfectly.

THE END.

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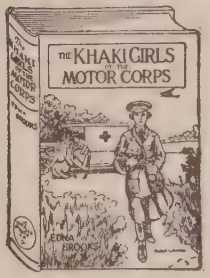

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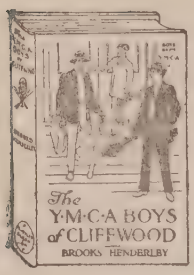

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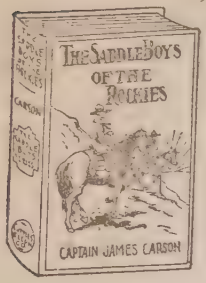

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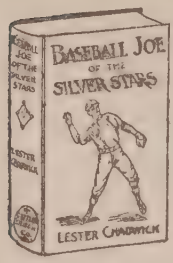

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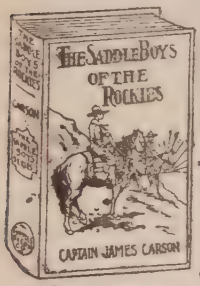

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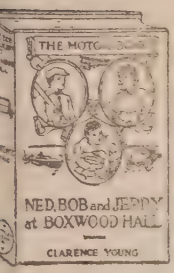

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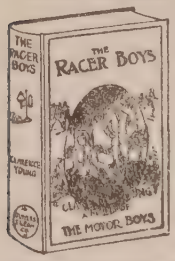

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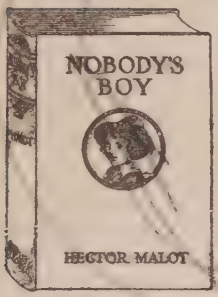

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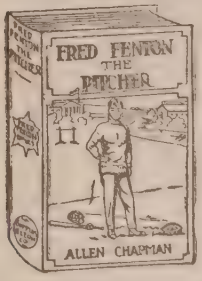

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